Changing structures may be a less important factor in creating an effective approach to governance than leadership, relationships, and trust.

What Is More Important to Effective Governance: Relationships, Trust, and Leadership, or Structures and Formal Processes?

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Over the past several decades, there has been considerable criticism about academic governance within institutions of higher education. A national study in the 1990s found that 70 percent of campus faculty, staff, and administrators believed that decision-making processes were working ineffectively, and noted that new approaches needed to be considered (Dimond, 1991). Some posit that academic governance limits an institution’s agility and flexibility, creating obstructions and sluggishness, and fostering a predisposition toward the status quo (Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges, 1996; Schuster, Smith, Corack and Yamada, 1994). Others worry that administrators have become fixated on meeting political and social pressures, stabilizing finances, and promoting efficiency and accountability; the problem, according to this view, is that these administrators have also lost touch with education-based decision making, quality, and the real purposes of higher education (Birnbaum, 1989; Tierney, 2000). There is widespread acknowledgment of the governance problem, but few solutions have been proposed and, of those, few have proven successful.

The dominant perspective, or common wisdom, is that campus governance needs radical alteration of its structure and its formal processes. One well-publicized study by Benjamin and Carroll of the RAND Corporation (1998) suggested that campus governance was wholly ineffective and
inefficient because of its structure and processes. The authors found that campus governance structures and processes do not allow for timely review or for effective, expertise-based decision making; furthermore, they are not responsive to external concerns.

In the midst of these calls to reform governance radically through restructuring, a second perspective is emerging—one that suggests that relationships, trust, and leadership, rather than reengineering, are key to enhancing governance (Braskamp and Wergin, 1998; Del Favero, 2003; Weingartner, 1996). This perspective is described by Robert Birnbaum’s meta-analysis, Management Fads in Higher Education (2000). Birnbaum demonstrates that restructuring and reengineering have failed to bring the improvements that were claimed for them. Instead, Birnbaum suggests, enhancing leadership, developing training, and building relationships might be more effective methods for improving institutional operations.

This emerging perspective has not yet been articulated in a comprehensive way. Instead, scholarly work on leadership, relationships, and trust has occurred in isolated pockets across the discipline. In this chapter, drawing on both previous and current research, I bring these independent voices together to articulate a unified counternarrative to the structural view of how to improve governance.

What Are Governance and Effectiveness?

*Governance* refers to the process of policymaking and macrolevel decision making within higher education. At the broadest level, the literature on governance has typically examined state boards, boards of trustees, faculty senates, and student government. This chapter focuses on academic (or internal) governance, which is defined as the manner in which issues affecting the entire institution (or one or more components thereof) are decided (Lee, 1991).

A few authors have offered definitions of effectiveness or good governance. Schuster, Smith, Corak, and Yamada (1994) suggested that effectiveness is the value of achieving a quality decision and that it is based on competence. Further, there are some generally accepted principles when it comes to quality: quality is defined in terms of outcomes; quality involves integrity of process; and quality requires decisions based on evidence, wherever possible (Massey, 2003).

Birnbaum (1991a) offered a different definition of good or effective governance, one that is tied directly to the culture of individual institutions. Birnbaum notes that as each college or university varies in its definition of effectiveness, generalizations are difficult to make. However, he notes that effectiveness is a match between the expectations of constituents and how the process and outcomes evolve. Therefore, if people on campus believe in a political process based on negotiation and compromise, then governance is effective if its process and outcomes reflect that approach. Birnbaum’s
work suggests that structures would be important on bureaucratic campuses or within bureaucratic units of a campus, whereas relationships would be more important on small, collegial campuses. In addition, definitions of effectiveness vary depending on whether a campus is bureaucratic (stressing efficiency) or political (stressing interest group contentment).

Schuster’s and Birnbaum’s definitions of effectiveness are both helpful. Campus culture matters and, at certain institutions, either structures or informal political processes will likely take on greater importance. Still, certain conditions that facilitate governance may transcend cultures altogether. The most important ones, in my view, are leadership, relationships, and trust.

Interrelationship of Structures and Process with Leadership and Relationships

In this chapter, I examine structures and formal processes, artificially separating them from relationships and leadership. I make this distinction only to emphasize where institutions may want to focus efforts and resources. For example, it can be expensive both to alter a governance structure radically and to provide leadership training. Institutions will not always have the luxury, especially in these difficult financial times, to pay for both. It is important to note that structures and processes tend to influence relationships, leadership arrangements, and trust. For instance, if faculty and administrators develop a process to ensure consultation and the advice produced by that consultation is used, trust is developed.

Similarly, but perhaps less formally, relationships and leadership can have an effect on structures and processes. In this way structures and processes begin to look different in practice than they do on paper. For example, a committee might begin with a specific charge, timeline, and set of procedures, yet through conversations the charge might be modified, new people might be added to the committee, and meeting procedures might be altered. In other words, structures and processes are not static. Still, in this essay I separate structures and processes from leadership and relationships as a heuristic device that enables us to examine how to create effective governance and advise about where to focus efforts. Structures and processes as well as relationships and leadership are important for any governance process.

In addition, policymakers and leaders are usually inclined toward global, singular solutions that involve restructuring. Working with individual people and developing relationships can be a more arduous, unpredictable, and long-term task. In the rush for quick-fix solutions, institutions grasp for scientific management techniques that tend to focus more on structure and process than on people and relationships. Because of this bias among policymakers and leaders, it is important to explore alternative methods for creating meaningful change within academic governance.
The Conventional Wisdom: Change Structures and Governance Will Be More Effective

Scholars utilizing structural theories suggest that the most important aspect in creating a functional governance system is to focus on organizational structures such as lines of authority, roles, procedures, and bodies responsible for decision making. Scholars also study structure because they believe that it can be “managed” or altered more directly than social interaction, which it nevertheless influences. This research is appealing because it provides a clear roadmap for policymakers. The appeal is clear—but does it work?

Although governance is an understudied area (see Kezar and Eckel, forthcoming), the limited research that has been done focuses on structure. The majority of this work suggests that structure has an impact on efficiency but does little to improve effectiveness. For example, studies find that the size and complexity of the governance structure or process affects the efficiency of decision making; the larger the size of the institution, the more time-consuming the process will be (Birnbaum, 1991b; Cohen and March, 1974; Lee, 1991; Mintzberg, 1979). The composition and role of governance bodies also influence efficiency (Dill and Helm, 1988; Lee, 1991). If the governance body includes key individuals with the necessary expertise and a clear understanding of their role, then the process becomes more efficient (Dill and Helm, 1988).

In terms of effectiveness, however, structural approaches have proven more limited (for a detailed description of this issue, see Kezar and Eckel, forthcoming). It is true that better-articulated structures—such as committees with clear charges and defined roles—can shape effectiveness (Mortimer and McConnell, 1979; Schuster, Smith, Corak, and Yamada, 1994). And lack of rewards for participation in governance shapes both effectiveness (not attracting strong people to these roles on campus) and efficiency, in that people make governance a low priority as a result (Dill and Helm, 1988; Gilmour, 1991; Mortimer and McConnell, 1979).

Still, most studies of governance structures have been limited in scope (examining one or two structural modifications) and small in size (a few case studies, or surveys of a limited number of institutions). A recent comprehensive study (involving a survey of several thousand institutions and multiple structural variables) by Kaplan (Chapter Two, this volume) helps to provide even more definitive evidence that structures are not meaningful to governance. Kaplan examined board size, meeting frequency, allocation of board power, union status, centralization and decentralization, and other structural issues, and studied how they related to a set of governance outcomes or policies, like merit pay or teaching loads. In the end, Kaplan found only a small relationship between decisions that are arrived at and structural issues like the assignment of authority over those decisions. He notes that “structures of governance do not appear to account, in a significant way, for variance in outcomes among institutions of higher education” (p. 31).
These findings would not be surprising to organizational scholars, who have demonstrated that organizations generally do not operate as bureaucracies in which structure accounts for behavior. Instead, organizations are political, relational, and anarchical.

**Recent Wisdom: Leadership and Relationships**

It is somewhat problematic to describe scholarship on leadership and relationships as “recent wisdom”; insights on these topics should rather be considered old wisdom that has had a rebirth recently, challenging the bureaucratic and scientific views of organizations that have been prevalent over the last hundred years. Morgan (1997) attributes the reemerging emphasis on humanity within organizations to the development of human relations, as well as cultural and political theories of organization. However, none of these theories were able to rival the hold of structural perspectives until breakthroughs in the natural sciences demonstrated that the physical universe operates in more organic, interconnected ways than was previously supposed. Most of the recent literature on organizations (chaos theory, for instance) highlights that relationships are more important than structures and processes because organizations must be able to alter structures and processes to adapt to circumstances. In other words, structures and processes are not the heart of organizations—people and relationships are (Wheatley, 1996). As Del Favero (2003) notes, organizations thrive only to the extent that participant relationships are central to decision-making processes.

In addition to the newer theories of organizations, which emphasize the significance of relationships to organizational performance and functioning, earlier research on governance provides evidence that conventional wisdom about structures is off the mark. Schuster, Smith, Corak, and Yamada (1994) demonstrated that leadership and leadership style are critical to governance outcomes; in fact, of all the conditions examined in that study, leadership and leadership style had the most significant impact on governance effectiveness. In their analysis of ten institutions, Schuster, Smith, Corak, and Yamada determined that efficiency, implementability, and ownership of the governance process were strongly related to leadership. Middle-level leadership among faculty senate committee chairs, chairs, deans, and faculty was found to be the most important to creating effective governance. Lee (1991) and Birnbaum (1991b) demonstrated that the quality of senate leadership affected administrators’ perceptions of whether the group was effective. Lee also found that campuses that addressed leadership continuity and provided information, training, and advice to new officers were more successful at governance. However, orientation and development of leaders within governance was uncommon; few campuses provided these opportunities (Birnbaum, 1991b; Lee, 1991).

Several studies have found that interpersonal dynamics, group processes, group motivation and interest, and committee membership are
among the most significant issues that campuses should focus on in order
to improve governance (Baldridge, 1971 and 1982; Birnbaum, 1991b; Dill
and Helm, 1988; Mortimer and McConnell, 1979; Schuster, Smith, Corak,
and Yamada, 1994). Yet most of these studies did not focus on relationships
in much depth. An exception is a case study analysis by Lee (1991) that
focused on academic senates. She found that informal interaction—inter-
action outside the hierarchical structure and beyond designated roles—was
critical to success. She further identified that certain relationships were par-
ticularly critical; for example, interpersonal dynamics between the president
and the senate chair are instrumental to the success or failure of governance.

The focus of such studies has been on means for increasing participa-
tion and on consultation as a proxy for relationships. In other words, con-
sultation is seen as inherently relational and important to the development
of the sorts of interpersonal connections that might be sustained over time.
Mortimer and McConnell (1979) conducted an extensive case study analy-
sis to determine the most important aspects of a functional governance
system; they found that having healthy relationships was critical. These rela-
tionships are developed through participation and consultation. In addition,
a more inclusive process with broad participation increases the likelihood
of valuable input that can improve a policy or decision (Williams, Gore,
Broches, and Lostski, 1987). The major components of the consultation
process include early input, joint formulation of procedures, adequate time
to articulate responses, availability of information, adequate feedback, and
communication of decisions (Dill and Helm, 1988). Participation and con-
sultation alone are not adequate to build relationships, but being able to see
that input has altered decisions or been taken into consideration is neces-
sary for involvement to be considered legitimate. These kinds of interac-
tions lead to greater commitment and, over time, to greater effectiveness

The notion of legitimacy in relationships relates to issues of trust. Lee’s
case study of three campuses found that a history of mistrust between fac-
culty and administrators had an impact on the success of governance at those
institutions. Governance effectiveness has been demonstrated to be related
to accountability on the part of the ultimate decision makers, and the sense
that they listen to the council or senate, or whatever governance bodies exist
on campus (Lee, 1991; Schuster, Smith, Corak, and Yamada, 1994). The
importance of trust is also confirmed by studies that illustrate that gover-
nance processes have been brought to a halt when feedback is not followed
or commitments are otherwise broken (Lee, 1991; Schuster, Smith, Corak,
and Yamada, 1994). Although our knowledge on these issues is still limited,
there is evidence to support the importance of leadership, relationships, and
trust to a robust governance process.

In summary, restructuring and other structural solutions have had a
significant effect on efficiency but minimal impact on effectiveness. In con-
trast, previous research has demonstrated that leadership, relationships, and
trust have strong potential for increasing effectiveness. The few existing studies on relationships, leadership, and trust have rarely provided sufficient depth to understand why these concepts and conditions are so important and how they are related to effectiveness. The case study project described below adds greater depth of understanding about why these three elements are so meaningful for creating effective governance.

Stories from Campuses with New Approaches to Governance

The stories in this section are taken from case studies of campuses that have altered their governance process. These stories are useful because they demonstrate what it is like to address a governance system that is not working. Initially, each campus had altered the structure of governance, but had not focused on relationships, trust, or leadership in relation to it. This is not unusual, of course. As noted earlier, almost all campuses are guided by conventional wisdom, and thus are inclined to alter structures when dealing with governance problems. In these case studies, I examined what emerged as more important for making governance systems effective. Effectiveness was determined according to campus participants’ perceptions as well as the researchers’ observations. The case studies involved interviews with faculty, staff, and administrators. Prior to visiting each campus, I reviewed planning documents for the change in governance, evaluation of the governance system, faculty senate reports, institutional planning documents, task force and committee reports, and accreditation reports.

The stories and examples supported the second perspective emerging in the literature; that is, that what really matters for governance is leadership, relationships, and trust. On campuses where these three elements were missing, governance was not effective, regardless of the structures present. In turn, no matter how problematic the structures, if these elements existed, governance was generally effective. These examples are helpful for understanding some of the ways that these elements made a significant difference.

Leadership as Pivotal. New structures were only as successful as the leaders that emerged on campuses. Structures alone could not facilitate effective decisions and policymaking. Campuses that had poor leadership around governance failed, while dedicated leaders (or groups of leaders) made the new structures work. Leadership facilitated effectiveness by providing a sense of direction and priorities and moving processes toward an outcome. People involved in governance noted that you can have the right individuals involved and the correct type and size of teams, but without a person to drive the process, policymaking will stall or be misdirected to minutiae. Several people on one campus described the apt work of a participatory faculty leader and how she created direction, pointing out that “She kept us thinking about the big picture, moved conversations along, and was organized.” Most people said this
particular leader was unique because she had administrative and leadership training and experience.

Consistently, individuals serving on effective governing bodies described a leader (or group of leaders) who provided direction, movement, and priorities. Leadership styles varied—some were participatory and some were directive—but regardless of style, campus participants reflected on the importance of providing direction and being focused on outcomes. Leadership was not always traceable to a single individual; it might come from cochairs or a subset of the senate. In addition, leadership sometimes emerged among individuals without positions of power (for example, the senate chair of vice presidents). Instead, a new faculty member in, say, math might lead the charge on an issue. One person described how one task force member helped create an effective process: “I have been on too many groups that floundered in discussion. Harry just took it on to provide that focus for our group. He provided vision and also guided discussion.” The existence of many informal leaders also demonstrates how the development of formal processes and structures cannot ensure leadership.

A sense of direction led to greater involvement and commitment from participants—particularly key individuals with legitimacy and status on campus. A faculty leader described her success at getting numbers of expert members on her governing unit; critical to quality decision making, such membership was also rare: “I think it’s one of the reasons we don’t have difficulty getting people to serve on that group. I spoke with somebody who had been on Y who put his name in as a nominee for X and he said, ‘One of the reasons I did it is because you people get things done, I trust the leadership.’”

Although these two committees had identical structures, they had different leadership; it was the leadership that people believed created a more effective process (both because it provided the direction and priorities for the committee and because it involved key people) and thus resulted in better decisions.

As involvement and commitment of key people increased, so did ownership and a sense of meaning. Governance was no longer a task or routine activity that people had to “suffer” through to meet institutional obligations or to prevent poor decisions that jeopardized work conditions and student learning. Instead, governance became an activity that participants could see meaningfully shaping their environment and creating an effective context for learning as well as a thriving institution. This was a critical turn that leadership was instrumental in creating. The story of a particular committee on one campus demonstrates how a leader facilitated this change by giving a short speech about the contributions of the committee. The leader then asked people to reflect on what they felt they had accomplished; she was amazed that they didn’t speak about specific goals, but that instead “what came out was a real sense of appreciation that this was not another committee, it was a group that had made meaningful decisions for the future.”
Relationships of Integrity Built on Trust. I described leadership first because it is central to the types of relationships that form within governance. Members of the governance group that reflected on their appreciation for the group process had developed a particular kind of relationship. They described their respect and mutual trust for one another. This enabled them to work together in ways that differed from the governance units they had previously been involved with. One member stated, “[Over the years], I have served on close to a hundred task forces, committees, the senate, and planning groups. This was the first time I have developed these types of relationships, and it changed the nature of our work as well as outcomes and policies developed. I feel that the work of this group had more integrity.”

Within the governance process, leaders are instrumental in setting a tone for the types of relationships that will develop.

But why are relationships critical to effective governance? The answer is that effective governance depends on people being willing to share their insights and ideas. Unless there are relationships of respect and trust, people do not share ideas. One member of a campus planning committee described his experience of mutual respect on a committee and how it altered the work of the committee: “Being trusted with information, being valued, and getting extensive communication have changed the nature of the dialogue; we are coming up with creative ideas that I have never seen before in my thirty years on the campus.”

Relationships of integrity are crucial if people are to get outside of personal agendas and work together toward institutional policy setting. In effective governance people are able to examine evidence and data, getting beyond their personal biases and interests and focusing instead on the common good. Individuals in the case studies I conducted told how relationships nurtured in the governance process enabled them to develop quality decisions they could be proud of, as in this example: “There is a big difference between the groups that I have seen make strong decisions and those that make no or problematic decisions. From my experience, it comes down to the relationships among the people in the decision-making body. These relationships can be formed informally outside the governance context or within the governance group. So, it doesn’t matter how or where they are formed, but good decisions generally require people who can work together well. And working well doesn’t mean ‘happy talk,’ it means civil debate and respect.”

When bonds among participants in the group are tightened, the group becomes better able to work as a team and to develop cognitively complex decisions and policy—that is, decisions that take into account more perspectives and evidence (for more details about teams and cognitive complexity, see Bensimon and Neumann, 1993). Relationships were also critical for decisions being seen as legitimate by members of the group and therefore by others on campus. All too often people leave a committee or senate meeting only to tell everyone about the disastrous decision or policy that
was just made. When there are relationships of integrity among people, those people are less likely to speak disparagingly about a decision and more likely to describe the reasons and rationale behind it, prompting ownership among their colleagues at the university.

Relationships and trust are hard to separate; good relationships lead to trust, and trust develops good relationships. There are two relationships in particular in which trust is critical to effective governance: the relationship between faculty and administrators (often epitomized by the relationship between senate chair and president), and the relationship between the president and his or her board. If trust does not exist in these relationships, effective governance is unlikely. On some campuses studied, lack of trust between various faculty groups also thwarted governance.

I was best able to understand why trust was so significant by examining campuses where trust did not exist. Generally, people on such campuses acted out of fear or anger. They did not communicate openly or honestly, they withheld data and information, they lobbied for an interest rather than listening, and they were unable to see common goals. Without trust, people did not feel safe. One person described the way the need to feel safe related to good governance: “In the past, I felt I could not trust people. The administration seemed to be working against the faculty, we were perceived as the enemy almost. When voting on policy, I was always suspicious—what is their angle? I would vote against things that seemed to make sense, knowing that in some way, it must work against faculty. And they never listened to us, so policies that came up, I knew had limited faculty input or perhaps none.”

In this case, fear and anger prevented decisions that favored the overall interests of the campus. But where trust existed, people could step outside their specific interests and think about the campus as a whole. One story from a president helps illustrate this point. She was trying to alter transfer requirements, making it easier for students to come in from another school. She worried that it would be a horrible struggle, but she knew the campus had been working to develop trust. To her surprise there was a willingness to change; no one came forth with the usual complaint that administration was just trying to increase numbers and didn’t care whether students were smart or not. She noted how the faculty stayed centered on their values and mission by asking what was absolutely essential for a student to take in the curriculum to make them feel ready and at the same time not have as many hurdles to join us here. She was happy that faculty moved past old territorial patterns and more narrow concerns.

**Conclusion**

The evidence from the case studies I conducted is that leadership, trust, and relationships supersede structures and processes in effective decision making. A governance system can operate with imperfect structures and processes, but
if leadership is missing and relationships and trust damaged, the governance system will likely fail for lack of direction, motivation, meaning, integrity, a sense of common purpose, ways to integrate multiple perspectives, open communication, people willing to listen, and legitimacy.

A new perspective is gaining support: campuses can build effective governance through an investment in leadership development and through mechanisms that nurture faculty, staff, and administrative relationships (for example, sponsoring campuswide events). These actions (fostering leadership development and building relationships) will also contribute positively to the intangibles of human interaction, such as trust. Investment in training for leaders is perhaps the best way to create better relationships and trust since leaders are pivotal in the development of both of these areas.

References


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