Viewing Faculty Governance within a Social Justice Framework: Struggles and Possibilities for Democratic Decision-Making in Higher Education

Dilys Schoorman
Florida Atlantic University

Michele Acker-Hoevar
Washington State University—Tri-Cities

For many faculty members in colleges of education, social justice is a concept they teach or a lens that frames their scholarship about efforts to combat injustice in settings outside the university. Rarely does it serve as a lens for understanding or guiding the ordinary activities of faculty service, such as engagement in faculty governance. Yet the increasing corporatization of universities and its concomitant threats to academic communities as inclusive and democratic decision-making spheres necessitates the study of faculty governance within a critical social justice framework. This article, contextualized in a multi-campus college of education in a large, public university on the east coast of the US, addresses how leaders in faculty governance extended the principles of diversity and social justice taught in their classrooms to leadership practice and democratic decision-making within a college of education. Highlighted are practical strategies for increasing faculty voice and leadership listening and a critical reflection on the implications of the struggle for democratic decision-making within autocratic, corporatized organizational cultures.

A central concern of social justice educators in public school and teacher education settings is the deleterious impact of “business as usual” practices, where false notions of meritocracy and competitiveness impose a one-size-fits-all, commodified orientation to education, undermining the democratic purposes of education (Darling Hammond, 2004; Hursh, 2009; Keiser, 2005; Michelli, 2005; Sleeter, 2005). The neoliberal marketization trends that have given rise to the oppressive accountability regimes in public schools have begun to impact higher education institutions as well (Canaan & Shumar, 2008; Giroux, 2002; Gould, 2003; Shumar, 2008; Slaughter & Leslie, 1997). The impact of corporatization on universities in general, and on faculty governance in particular, has emerged as a significant concern (Andrews, 2006; Appadurai, 2009; Olssen & Peters, 2005) with calls for a restoration and strengthening of faculty governance if academic
institutions are to fulfill their critical social imperative as inclusive, democratic, public spheres (Rhoades, 2005).

Scholarship on faculty governance is, according to Kezar and Eckel (2004), almost exclusively focused on structural functionalist perspectives of university senates and clearly unconnected to the scholarly discourse of social justice. There is a paucity of literature on college-level governance. Furthermore, while extant scholarship identifies desired models of leadership (Campbell, 2003), structures and models of governance (Birnbaum, 1989; Minor, 2004), and perceptions of effectiveness of governance structures (Tierney, 2001; Tierney & Minor, 2003), limited scholarship exists at a more grassroots level. Scholarship at the more micro level is needed to guide campus leaders in re-thinking their approaches to governance, particularly through the lens of diversity and social justice. This study of faculty governance in a college of education emerges from these gaps in this scholarship.

This study marks a significant shift in the scholarship on faculty governance in that it draws upon our lived experiences as officers1 (Chair and Secretary) of the college faculty assembly. On being elected to leadership positions in our college’s Faculty Assembly, we consciously sought to practice in our work in faculty governance the principles of diversity and social justice that we taught in our classrooms as faculty members in the departments of Teacher Education and Educational Leadership. Central to our work as leaders and researchers was a critical analysis of and reflection upon the various and complex ways in which power dynamics are enacted in governance structures (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2005). The focus here is the manner in which power was negotiated, acted upon, and responded to by us as leaders and distributed and shared among faculty assembly members, as a consequence of the decision-making processes we facilitated. Contextualizing faculty governance within a framework of diversity and social justice, this study is guided by the following questions:

1. How can faculty assembly leaders transfer the principles of diversity and social justice espoused in their teaching to their work in faculty governance?
2. How can faculty assembly leaders create and maintain structures for faculty voice and organizational listening in the context of faculty governance?
3. What are the struggles experienced in the shifting power dynamics of the democratization of decision-making, and what meanings might be attached to these struggles?

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Faculty Governance in the Context of Academic Corporatization

Our efforts as leaders in faculty governance are contextualized in struggles on two fronts: (a) the impact of neoliberalism and the increasing corporatization of academic institutions on faculty governance processes (Andrews, 2006; Aronowitz, 2006; Aronowitz & Giroux, 2000; Giroux, 2002; Rhoades, 2005; Waugh, 2003; Wilson, 2009) and (b) the perceived ineffectiveness of faculty governance processes to address substantive issues (Birnbaum, 1989, 2002; Kezar 2005; Scott, 1996; Tierney & Minor, 2003). Neoliberalism is a theory of political/economic practices that views the market as a central metaphor for understanding organizational effectiveness, where competition, efficiency, privatization, and deregulation are valued (Apple, 2004; Harvey, 2005; Stromquist,
The impact of academic corporatization on public education systems is evident in the forms of competition for meager resources and in the re-framing of education and scholarship as an entrepreneurial venture where knowledge is viewed as a commodity (Apple, 2004; Arvast, 2006; Shumar, 2008; Stein, 2004). The outcomes of such corporatization—oppressive accountability regimes, narrowed curriculum, efforts to de-skill and de-value teachers and teacher education programs, and the deleterious effect of such policies on students of color and in poverty—serve as catalysts for social justice advocacy in the public school context (Darling Hammond, 2004; McDonald & Zeichner, 2009; Sleeter, 2008).

At universities, the mass market approach to education is evident in larger class sizes, online classes, increased use of temporary instructors, elimination of programs deemed unnecessary or that have lower enrollment, and in the short-circuiting of faculty involvement in decision-making on these matters based on concerns about time constraints and efficiency. These practices threaten efforts toward differentiated instruction, culturally relevant pedagogy, broad-based involvement, and deliberative decision-making. The potential parallels between the public schools and the university regarding the alienation of students, increased failure rates, productivity, and quality framed in narrow quantitative measures, as well as the proletarianization of teachers are stark. Giroux (2002, 2004a, 2004b) refers to neoliberalism as the most dangerous ideology of the current historical moment, one that threatens the democratic mission of public education and reduces higher education to a financial investment and learning to workforce training. Apple (2004) notes that unless we think tactically about these transformations, “we will have little effect either on the creation of a counter-hegemonic common sense or on the building of a counter-hegemonic alliance” (p. 13). The fact that our university’s faculty had not taken a collective stance against such forces that had the potential to significantly alter the quality of education for students and faculty work life (see Andrews, 2006) served as an urgent starting point for our work in faculty governance.

Central to this analysis are the concerns about the impact of corporatization on faculty governance processes in the university (viewed by Andrews [2006] as the neoliberal colonization of academic engagement with a concomitant erosion of faculty governance). This view is shared by scholars who note that the recent fiscal crisis has lead administrators to “propose swift changes that short circuit faculty governance” (Wilson, 2009, p. A1) and replace faculty governance with management models of decision-making. The management models promote short-term profits over long-term investments and decision-making outcomes over process (re-framing students as products, faculty and their intellectual property as commodities, and administrators as managers or corporate CEOs). They also disenfranchise faculty in decision-making processes (Andrews, 2006; Aronowitz, 2006; Aronowitz & Giroux, 2000). This marginalization of faculty governance also eliminates the benefits of deliberation and compromise typical of shared governance and the importance of the faculty’s role in decision-making, which are at odds with the corporate values of expediency and efficiency (Rhoades, 2005).

Perspectives vary on the potential of faculty senates to address these new dynamics. While many agree that these emerging corporatizing pressures urgently call for strong faculty governance characterized by their traditional goals of generating collegial debate, a sense of community, and a thorough investigation of important academic issues (Andrews, 2006; Gerber, 2001; Glotzbach, 2001; Hollinger, 2001), many scholars note that faculty senates typically tend to fall short of these expectations (Birnbaum, 1989, 2002; Eckel, 2000; Kezar, 2005; Scott, 1996; Tierney & Minor, 2003) or are irrelevant within the emerging market-driven model of the institution.
Criticisms revolve around the consensus that governance structures are too slow, inefficient, and unresponsive (Birnbaum, 1989), ill-equipped to handle complex issues of diversity or financial stress (Kezar, 2005), and engage in petty politics (Hollinger, 2001) by disaffected faculty (Wilson, 2009). Critics also note that faculty governance involves increased workload, which is frequently unrewarded by institutional incentives and results in faculty disengagement and cynicism (Miller, 1996; Tierney & Minor, 2003). Inefffectual faculty governance systems enable greater administrative intrusion (Gordon, 2007; Williams, Gore, Broches, & Lostoski, 1987). Hollinger (2001) notes,

Governance works best when there is some actual governing going on. . . . Shared governance can be a joke when administrators do the governing and chuckle privately at faculty senate leaders who can be kept earnestly busy worrying about parking policies. (p. 30)

Both supporters and critics (and these are not mutually exclusive groups) note that current governance practices need to be strengthened, either to develop an innovation-friendly culture (Tierney, 2001) or to resist the innovations required by corporatization (Andrews, 2006). Our leadership in faculty governance was contextualized within this debate. Where this discussion of faculty governance departs from traditional studies is its distinctly critical focus on how faculty governance can begin to engage with and interrogate the hegemonic power dynamic yielded by corporatization. This study offers a discussion of our efforts to safeguard against potentially oppressive power structures in decision-making engendered by the values and practices of corporatization in the university.

Faculty Governance as Democratic Decision-Making

Given the overwhelming concerns about the circumvention of participatory decision-making in the context of corporatization, as well as the historical concerns about the lack of faculty engagement in governance, our leadership was grounded in a commitment to restore the college assembly as a venue for grassroots democratic decision-making within the college that connected decision-making to effective organizational communication. We position faculty governance within a framework of organizational communication for voice and listening, and we integrate structure, politics, and culture in our focus. In so doing, we moved beyond the singular perspectives of structure, politics, or organizational culture as lenses for analysis typical of extant scholarship (Kezar & Eckel, 2004) and recognize their interrelatedness.

Our perspectives are grounded in the assumptions that communication and organization are interdependent and co-constructed phenomena and that our communication practices could reproduce, transform, and challenge power dynamics within the organization (Deetz & Mumby, 1990; Habermas, 1979; Mumby, 2001). Our leadership revolved around two communicative practices—voice and listening—and their interdependent roles in facilitating partnership power (Snyder, Acker-Hocevar, & Snyder, 2008) as an alternate to the prevailing hierarchically oriented paradigm. Although voice has emerged as a key concept in critical studies, the concomitant role of listening is less represented, even though organizational process and outcomes are quite different in the absence of listening (Meier, 1996, 2002). Democratization emerged within these communicative practices as faculty voice was construed in its plurality, with the full expectation of
divergent perspectives, and leadership listening was conceptualized in terms of leaders’ obligation and accountability to the faculty who had elected them as representatives to the administration.

By consciously creating the mechanisms to hear diverse perspectives internally, and by framing listening as integral to our roles as faculty leaders, we attempted to model inside-out leadership (Braskamp & Wergin, 2008) that went beyond the individualistic role of good citizen (Campbell, 2003) to engage in the iterative process of developing shared purpose, collective consciousness, and critical reflection on leadership actions. Our purpose as leaders was to engage in a process of conscientization and empowerment (Freire, 2000) with our faculty colleagues, which required shared governance rather than our acquiescing to top-down autocratic models of decision-making. This meant making faculty critically aware of the political dynamics of decision-making (i.e., asking who was making which decisions, on behalf of whom, and for whose benefit), recognizing that faculty needed to have a voice in decision-making, and demonstrating to faculty how they could engage in collective agency through the faculty assembly. This article describes how the faculty assembly served as a conduit of faculty voice with specific examples of how faculty advocated reversing administrator-generated decisions.

Within this context of decision-making, diversity is conceptualized as the sources and directionality of organizational communication: the creation of governance and decision-making structures that support different viewpoints, debate and dialogue, to generate a bottom-up representative governance/decision-making structure. Consistent with our classroom practice in social justice pedagogy, our perspective was that more voices would yield more viewpoints, which would support more robust decision-making that was representative of broad-based faculty concerns. Thus, the democratization of faculty governance entailed openness to all perspectives, an obligation to listen to and build consensus from this diversity, transparency in the decision-making process, and leadership accountability through listening and action. This was based on an agenda that emerged from the faculty, re-conceptualizing the college assembly as a conduit of trickle-up (Rhoades, 2005) communication between faculty and college administrators. The prevailing structures of communication were top-down and unidirectional that either came directly from the Dean or through the Department Chairs. There was no clear mechanism or opportunity for two-way communication. Establishing a two-way communication process that provided accountability for listening was a means to ensure that faculty voices were heard.

RESEARCH CONTEXT

This study of faculty governance was undertaken in a multi-campus college of education in a large public university dispersed across 100 miles on the east coast of the US. At the time of the study, the college of education had 89 faculty members who, together with the dean, four associate deans, and seven chairs of departments were voting members of the faculty assembly. The ten-member steering committee of the faculty assembly (FA) comprised the officers (chair, vice-chair and secretary) and a representative of each department. The assembly met three times per semester, each preceded by a steering committee meeting held two weeks prior. By comparison, the university faculty senate comprised approximately 60 members elected from each of the colleges and campuses, led by a steering committee of eight (see Table 1). As a group of equivalent size, the study of the process of democratic participation within the college of education assembly has much to offer the existing scholarship on university faculty senates.
### TABLE 1

Comparative Structure of College and University Governance Systems

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Officers</th>
<th>College Faculty Assembly</th>
<th>University Faculty Senate</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Chair, Vice Chair, Secretary*</td>
<td>President (elected biennially)</td>
<td>President elect/outgoing president</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(elected annually)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Steering Committee</td>
<td>3 Officers</td>
<td>2 Officers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 representative from each department</td>
<td>3 senate representatives (elected annually by senate)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Membership</td>
<td>All tenured/tenure-track faculty members</td>
<td>Senators elected biennially to represent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dean, associate deans (4) and chairs of departments (by virtue of tenure in departments at the time of administrative appointment)</td>
<td>(proportionately): colleges</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total = 89</td>
<td></td>
<td>Total = 60</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Constitutional revisions in the year under review included the following changes: titles were changed to President, Vice President, and Secretary; an Archivist (to manage website and documentation) was added to the slate of officers; and the Vice President would now become President the following year.

The primary focus of this study is on the activities of a single academic year, 2003/04, in which we (the authors) were elected to serve as Chair and Secretary of the FA of the college. We are both associate professors. One of us teaches Educational Leadership, and the other Multicultural Education. Our philosophical positioning as advocates of social justice and critical multicultural education within those fields were central to our conceptualization of our own leadership as collaborators and consensus builders across diverse perspectives. Our own social identities as females, one of whom is of white American descent, the other a South Asian immigrant, who had not had the opportunity for professional collaboration of any sort prior to our election, served as a tangible indicator of collaboration across diversity in leadership practice. The vice chair (a white, American male) served for six months, then resigned to accept an administrative appointment and subsequently left the university. His position remained unfilled, but following his resignation, he assisted informally on tasks in which he had expertise. In the years that followed, we (authors) remained active in faculty governance, particularly at the university level, where we held office while continuing to serve in advisory and supportive roles at the level of the college. Our experiences and observations from these subsequent years serve as points of comparison to identify the long-term impact of the leadership listening and faculty voice of the year under review.

We position ourselves both inside of the research on faculty governance, especially as we address our struggles that emerge from examinations of our lived experiences as faculty leaders and outside of it, as we reflect critically (and in retrospect) on our actions as captured within the public documents pertaining to governance, contextualizing them in the research in the field. Our explicit agenda for interrogating and interrupting the top-down power dynamic of decision-making within the college and re-invigorating a relatively dormant faculty assembly to becoming a credible mechanism of advocacy places our work as leaders firmly within the framework of social justice as practice (Grogan, 2009).
METHODOLOGY

Data for this study of our leadership and decision-making, consisted of an archive of over 300 e-mails (among the three faculty assembly officers, the steering committee, and between faculty/administrators and the officers) as well as meeting documents (such as minutes, survey data, and presentation materials), and college- and university-wide communication about decision-making. Documents from the years following are also used for comparative purposes. E-mails served as a running record of our deliberations and decision-making and offer a unique, yet authentic, insight into the lived experiences of faculty leaders, as they capture the immediacy of thoughts and vibrancy of responses in decision-making contexts (Dholakia & Zhang, 2004; Marshall & Rossman, 2010). This electronic medium also represents the reality of how decision-making typically occurs in contemporary institutional contexts.

A commitment to data-based decision-making meant that e-mails and minutes of meetings were analyzed through a process of constant comparative analysis (Glazer & Strauss, 1967; Goetz & LeCompte, 1981) for themes related to decision-making. We identified the key issues that needed to be included in the assembly’s agenda for action and follow through. The results of these initial analyses were reported in a variety of documents (e.g., updates, announcements, and reports) and included in the database for this analysis. For the purpose of this study, documents and e-mails were coded to reveal the manner in which the two constructs of voice and listening were facilitated or exemplified and to identify specific evidence of consensus building and collective consciousness, as well as examples of our struggles to achieve democratic decision-making. While private communication did inform the initial stages of analysis, all data presented here are derived from publicly presented documents and archives of the faculty assembly. The use of public documents (especially minutes of meetings or reports that had to be approved by a quorum) underscores the collective agreement/acceptance of these data sources as a facet of the collective history of the faculty assembly. The inclusion of public assembly-related documents from subsequent years provides useful comparative data that addressed the impact of the leadership activities under review. The results highlight: (a) critical insights about power dynamics and (b) specific practical strategies for implementing democratic decision-making models.

RESULTS

The results describe the actions we took to create structures (i.e., described in this study as the explicit practices, processes, and strategies not present before our tenure in office) for faculty voice and leadership listening and the impact of these actions. We then discuss the struggles to engage in democratic decision-making in the context of autocratic, corporatized contexts.

Creating Structures for Voice and Listening

Our first step was to publicly reconceptualize our roles as leaders and as representatives of the faculty who model team leadership. We wished to set aside the hierarchical notion of leadership and power implied by our titles. We set about this reconceptualization in the first two lines of our first written message to the faculty: “We want to thank you for the opportunity to represent you . . . It is our vision to make the Faculty Assembly a means through which the faculty can
We have their views represented” (e-mail 06-08-03). We also defined the role of representatives in an e-mail about the election of department representatives.

It is our hope that faculty will nominate and elect representatives who:

- Will accurately represent faculty perspectives on the Steering Committee
- Will be open to representing diverse perspectives as they emerge in intra-departmental contexts
- Are perceived by faculty members to be fair-minded, and who will solicit faculty input without jeopardizing or negatively affecting faculty welfare in other professional contexts (e.g., this is not someone who will negatively impact someone’s Promotion and Tenure, or their opportunity for awards because of the faculty member’s opinions)
- Will adhere to high standards of professionalism, especially with regard to keeping individual faculty member’s perspectives confidential. (e-mail: 06-08-03)

Our concept of team leadership was explained to the officers of the following year as follows:

- Everything was a three-way decision. Faculty did not hear about anything that came from any one of us that had not already been discussed by the three.
- Although we always worked for consensus, we didn’t always begin our discussions from that position. The need for the team was to provide ourselves with the opportunity for debate (even argument) till we worked out our position.
- We reminded each other that always, we were representing faculty perspectives.
- We provided opportunity for the faculty to see us working as a team, so that it was not an empty use of the word. (e-mail: 08-06-04)

We signed all communication as a group, shared leadership responsibilities in meetings, divided responsibilities as liaisons to ad hoc committees, used inclusive language (we, our), viewed leadership tasks as interchangeable (e.g., the secretary led a faculty meeting with the new provost in the absence of the chair) and always met with the college administration as a team, rather than individually.

Our second task was informing faculty about the existing structures for democratic participation and how they were to be used. At our first meeting, we were explicit about our goal: “to increase democratic participation in faculty governance and to facilitate a shift in the organizational culture toward that goal. . . . ‘Action, Results and Follow-through’ would be the guiding principles for Faculty Assembly” (Minutes: 08-19-03.) We also presented, for the first time, the operating structure of the FA that specified all possible lines of communication with the officers (see Figure 1), including communication with their departmental representatives, any member of the steering committee, the leadership team, or during the open forum (a standard agenda item) of the meeting. This underscored our commitment to faculty that their interests would drive the agenda of the assembly. These structures were both mechanisms for faculty input and for leadership listening. We created additional structures for faculty input through five surveys of faculty that provided data central to our decision-making. To further promote transparency and shared understanding, the constitution was distributed to all members for the first time (it had not been readily accessible) and a website was constructed where all documents (constitution, minutes, and survey results) were archived.

The presentation of the results of the first survey (response rate: 84%) at the first meeting allowed us to identify the key concerns of the faculty that needed to be addressed that year.
In an exercise of collective decision-making, faculty formed ad hoc committees around the four most pressing concerns that emerged from the survey: salary equity, equity in assignments, democratic decision-making in the college and faculty-administration communication, and faculty connections (to facilitate sharing of research interests and social cohesiveness), each of which was ranked as moderately or very important by 84–90% of the respondents. Collectively, they represented at least one of the top four concerns of every respondent.

Another concrete example of leadership listening was introduced at the second meeting of the FA, in the form of what we called an “Update Matrix” (see Table 2), a table that identified each concern raised by the faculty and documented the progress made in addressing the problem.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Issue*</th>
<th>Source</th>
<th>How it is being addressed</th>
<th>Response Action</th>
<th>Follow-up</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Charter College</td>
<td>Questions raised on 02/06/04 re: Sen. Admin’s memo</td>
<td>Faculty asked Sen. Admin to respond to questions raised</td>
<td>Special Session called on 02/20/04; College retreat suggested by Sen. Admin</td>
<td>Retreat planned/ held: 04/23/04</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Just one issue, that of the Charter College decision, is presented as an example.
These updates were presented at every meeting and served as a demonstration of our listening and accountability to the faculty. Indicators of listening and accountability included the presentation of multiple reports, including reports on survey results, committees, and a Final Report (the first ever) of the year's undertakings, that specified what “has been achieved, has not been achieved, is still in process and needs to be undertaken next year.” Additionally, we facilitated leadership listening among college administrators who were invited to respond to specific faculty concerns during FA meetings.

Impact of Faculty Voice and Leadership Listening

The actions taken to create mechanisms for faculty input and leadership listening were political (shifting power dynamics toward faculty involvement in decision-making), cultural (using standard operating procedures to maximize democratic decision-making processes and in how leaders were held accountable), and technological (using a website, e-mail, video/teleconferencing to facilitate broad-based communication across the distributed campus model to three other sites). Immediate indicators of faculty participation included a 60% increase in attendance at assembly meetings (compared to the previous year), while 47% of the faculty became actively involved in assembly subcommittees. This included the active involvement of assistant professors (including those newly hired), who comprised four of seven departmental representatives on the steering committee. The agendas and duration of meetings almost doubled in average length from the previous year.

Immediate indicators of leadership listening include the fact that 20 of 24 issues raised by faculty and reported on the update matrix were followed through to resolution. The remaining four were marked for follow up by the next year’s officers (which occurred). Many of our actions/perspectives were incorporated into the revised constitution as desired standard operating procedures for the assembly. These include the adoption of the concept of team leadership, the addition of an archivist to the team of officers, the requirement of a final report by FA officers, and the requirement of departmental representation at steering committee meetings where meeting agendas were set (constitutional revision required a proxy to attend in the absence of the elected representative). Future officers adopted similar mechanisms—specifically the update matrix and electronic surveys—to demonstrate leadership listening and facilitate faculty voice.

The effectiveness of input and listening mechanisms on collective decision-making was evident in the example presented in Table 2, the proposal to apply for Charter College status. An e-mail was sent out by a college administrator at 5:48 p.m., on a Friday a week prior to the assembly meeting (the agenda had already been set and distributed). A faculty member contacted the leadership team about the concern regarding the college administration’s proposal to seek funding for turning the college of education into a Charter College. The leadership team was able to use the open forum of the FA meeting to express concerns about the proposal of the Charter College. The e-mail accompanying the proposal had noted, “I wanted to share the idea of a Charter College while it is still in draft form. . . . If the proposal is funded we will be looking for interested faculty to help develop a possible proposal.” While this was a proposal seeking funds to pursue the idea (the pursuit of funds important in the context of budget cuts), faculty concerns about the idea, resulted in a motion to call a special meeting of the assembly, where administrators would explain the
rationale for the plan and answer a list of faculty questions generated at the meeting. A senior administrator answered all faculty questions that had been previously compiled, demonstrating leadership listening. (This was significant because in a tense interaction between the officers and the administrator the previous day, the response of the administrator indicated that there was no plan to respond to the questions posed. Instead, we indicated that since this was the purpose of the meeting, we would ask the questions ourselves.) The opening statements of the FA chair were helpful in setting the tone for both listening and voice at this meeting:

At stake [is] how we move forward as a college and how we define ourselves. . . . Conflict [is] a natural part of organizational life and [is] good; what [is] important [is] how we handle ourselves and how we demonstrate our maturity as an organization . . . It [is] important for all of us to shape what our next steps should be. (Minutes: 02-19-04)

There was adequate time for debate and discussion during the meeting. The consequence of the meeting was that the plan for pursuing Charter College status (that would free the college from state regulation but require Teacher Education to be evaluated solely on standardized test scores of our graduates’ students) was abandoned and a retreat of the college, collaboratively led by the faculty assembly officers and college administrators, was planned to identify appropriate next steps for the college. This retreat was another first for the FA and was continued in following years as a means for setting the FA agenda and priorities of the college. The retreat has now become a standard not only for the college at the end of the academic year, but for departments, as well, at the beginning of each academic year.

Four years later, the long-term impact of establishing input and listening mechanisms was evident when faculty in the college opposed the policy development to centralize decision-making and governance in graduate study. This shift to top-down power, away from students, faculty, and the college, was strongly opposed following lengthy discussions and consensus decisions in the college graduate committee and the FA. Although the college of education appeared to be alone in its vocal opposition as a collective at the level of university senate, the measure failed to gain adequate votes. This opposition allowed our college to provide constructive feedback on how policy could be modified to ensure rigorous oversight at the university level, without compromising the legitimate power of graduate students, who were affected by the changes, and the graduate faculty, who make decisions about their graduate students’ dissertation work. The current policy document, which represents collective input generated from the college, is now approved and contains all but one of the recommendations presented by the college.

DISCUSSION

In the year under review, the FA emerged from what faculty described as a “toothless tiger” or “faculty debating society where people go to vent with little or no consequence” to being a body that was effective in achieving collective representation and presenting the concerns of faculty to the administrators and requiring responses. It became evident in the years that followed that faculty no longer had to be persuaded to participate, but rather, expected to be involved in decision-making where faculty input and leadership listening were assumed.
Despite the evidence of positive impact, the efforts toward democratic decision-making in faculty governance were not without struggle. Consistent with the increased valuing of market-based productivity over civic engagement in education institutions, one of the concerns identified in our final report was the realization that democratic participation in the context of faculty governance involved more work, by faculty in particular, which was under-valued and unrewarded (Miller, 1996; Tierney & Minor, 2003.) However, we also recognize that faculty engagement in decision-making that directly impacts their work/compensation is not desired merely for philosophical reasons, but is urgent, especially in a time of shrinking budgets and layoffs, even as the pressures associated with such responsibilities increase and volunteers to share the workload decrease. Greater legitimization of governance activities (by administrators and faculty leaders) as an integral facet of faculty workload, evaluation and compensation is crucial in this regard.

A second struggle, likely emerging as a result of the corporate values in decision-making in the broader administrative culture, was the tension between expediency and deliberation, and decision-making product over process. Cognizant of the criticism of faculty governance systems as being too cumbersome or too slow, our efforts were often shadowed by concerns about demonstrating tangible outcomes consistent with our pledge of “action, follow through, and results.” This tension emerged in efforts to get through packed agendas without short-circuiting discussion. Our experiences demonstrated value in making decisions first on areas of consensus and then working (sometimes through a committee) toward compromise on areas where there was divergence.

A third struggle that emerged as a consequence of doing democracy in an autocratic culture was the discomfort generated among both faculty and administrators who interpreted resurgent faculty voice as challenges to administration, especially on questions about budget and resource allocation. In organizational cultures socialized in top-down processes as the sole model for decision-making, challenges to the status quo could create an “us versus them” dichotomy. Persuading college administrators to address faculty concerns could be an ongoing struggle, in part, because the chain of command holds deans responsible to the provost and not to the faculty. Given this backdrop of a more autocratic, hierarchically-oriented culture, the notion of faculty input runs the risk of being framed as a courtesy extended to the faculty by college administrators, rather than a requirement for democratic decision-making within the college.

Our public statements in meetings and in e-mails were intended as rhetoric to which the faculty would hold us accountable for our actions. Simultaneously, we noted that this rhetoric was often co-opted by college administrators with no intent to follow through with actions. This co-optation included statements valuing faculty input in contexts where such input was desired only for affirmation (not opposition), where there was limited opportunity for feedback (short turn around, no time or opportunity for discussion), where contexts for candid feedback by faculty might be intimidating (e.g., e-mailing the dean, rather than commenting through a faculty representative or filling out a survey anonymously), where invitations for feedback were deliberately understated (buried in long-winded e-mails or sent out late on Friday, weekends, or during holidays), or where input was sought after a decision had been made. Many of these concerns were evident in the issue about the Charter College but are further highlighted in the following excerpt of an announcement from a senior administrator the following year with regard to the appointment of a college administrator: “I also met with the Faculty Assembly leadership this summer to discuss this decision. Consistent with our goal of providing faculty input on decisions, I am soliciting your feedback via email on this appointment” (08-03-04). What is not
evident in this note is that (a) the FA leadership opposed this appointment and (b) that faculty input was being requested after the decision had been made. Furthermore, there was no mechanism to gather and report on this feedback to ensure that leadership listening would occur.

Over the years we have also noted similar co-optation of the term “representative” to refer to faculty appointed by administrators to serve on committees where the administrators saw it as important to provide the symbolic appearance that faculty input was sought and represented in decision-making. Typically, there was no mechanism established for how authentic representation should occur, sometimes untenured faculty members or faculty members seeking promotion have been selected in an effort to expedite agendas that appear to need rubber-stamping, and almost always the reciprocal process of giving voice and demonstrating listening and accountability are absent. For this reason, leaders in faculty governance need to ensure that faculty elect their representatives and establish input and feedback mechanisms between representatives and their constituents. With regard to the co-optation of the term “leadership team,” faculty must ask questions about relative agenda setting and decision-making power of each team member to ensure the reconceptualization of leadership, rather than merely re-naming the status quo that is devoid of collaboration to achieve common goals.

CONCLUSION

The intents of this article were to extend discussions of diversity, social justice, and democratic practice beyond the college and university curriculum to the standard operating practices of academia and to stimulate discussions of how faculty governance itself might be reconceptualized. To this end we hope that this article serves as a catalyst for integrating the principles of social justice into the ordinary work of professors (Boske & Tooms, 2009). We also intended to present the work of faculty governance at a micro, grassroots level from a critical perspective that is absent in extant research. By extending the principles of social justice beyond our classroom pedagogy to include our leadership/service undertakings, we also began to engage in the advocacy and community building that we require of our students (school teachers and principals) and to acquire insights into the struggles of democratization in contexts that are becoming increasingly corporatized.

Our ability to analyze power dynamics and consider multiple perspectives—central concepts in social justice pedagogy—allowed for increased critical consciousness in decision-making as we raised questions about whose agenda and interests were represented in decision-making, challenged rhetoric unaccompanied by action, and worked toward building consensus across diversity. Consequently, our classroom discussions of the role of the individual within the collective allowed us to redefine leadership beyond traditional, individualistic notions to exemplify conceptions of partnership power (Snyder, Acker-Hocevar, & Snyder, 2008) and inside-out leadership (Braskamp & Wergin, 2008) in everyday action. We hope that this discussion of the need for stronger governance structures in the context of academic corporatization serves as a vehicle of conscientization for fellow faculty members in diverse academic institutions.

Framing faculty governance in the context of academic corporatization also underscored the tensions between traditional values of deliberative decision-making typically valued by advocates for diversity and social justice and the values of expediency, efficiency, and market-driven definitions of effectiveness. The ill-fated Charter College idea emerged in the context of shrinking
budgets and the need to explore alternative revenue sources (a bid that addressed short-term economic gain over long-term academic well being). The college’s opposition to the policy on graduate governance was linked to the proposed top-down centralized decision-making, which precluded faculty and student voice in key decision-making. Faculty responses to both these cases demonstrated that the presence of faculty governance and decision-making structures could be effective in blunting the impact of corporatization in organizational decision-making. They also demonstrated that collegial models of faculty governance that focused on decision-making for the collective good, where faculty input and leadership listening were strongly linked, were neither outdated nor dysfunctional.

Therefore, to our colleagues who value faculty governance and deliberative democratic decision-making, we offer the following insights. We need to rethink our roles as faculty leaders in the multiple contexts of the academic community, engage in representative leadership, recognize that opportunities for voice must be accompanied by demonstrations of active listening and accountability, and realize that organizational structures (and their creation, alteration, or analysis) cannot be divorced from their political and cultural dimensions. To fellow researchers we recommend the reconceptualization of faculty governance within a critical, social justice framework. More studies committed to enhancing communities of practice governed by the principles of social justice in higher education contexts are especially important in the current context of mounting market-driven pressures on universities and colleges, where taken-for-granted notions of academic freedom, faculty voice, and democratic governance could be subverted.

NOTE

1. When referring to the position to which we were elected, we will use the word “officer;” the term “leader” refers to a role to which we aspired, a role informed by scholarship in social justice and leadership.

REFERENCES


Dilys Schoorman is an associate professor in the Department of Curriculum, Culture, and Educational Inquiry at Florida Atlantic University in Boca Raton, Florida. Her work focuses on the intersections of multiculturalism, democracy, and social justice that infuse passion into her work in multicultural and global education, immigrant education/family literacy, and faculty governance.

Michele Acker-Hocevar is an associate professor in the Department of Educational Leadership and Counseling Psychology at Washington State University in the Tri-Cities. Her work focuses on leadership development and organizational improvement through addressing issues of social justice, particularly power dynamics and access to information and resources.