The Academic Senate as School for University Leadership
Martin Trow
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Section: DISCOURSE
Over the past century, as the quality and distinction of faculties in the leading research universities have risen, their own organization within the university, the academic senates, have assumed a larger role in the governance of the university. One might compare similarly the power of the great university presidents of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries—Charles W. Eliot, Daniel Coit Gilman, William Rainey Harper, David Starr Jordan, and the rest—with that of their successors.

The role of academic senates in university governance is now so clear that in many universities it is appropriate to talk about a pattern of cogovernance. If that is true, then would not the senate be an obvious source of training for university leadership and a cradle of university leaders? On the whole, and with exceptions, I think not. To see the academic senate as a source of leadership misconstrues the nature of academic governance and the role of academic senates in it.

Governance and cogovernance

Let us consider some areas in which decisions in a university are made: institutional size; capital investment; entrance standards; graduation standards; the appointment and promotion of faculty members; the curriculum; individual courses; the growth or contraction of schools and departments and the creation of new schools and departments; the nature and extent of student services; staff and faculty compensation.

While academic senates in different institutions differ in character, strength, and their roles in various areas of decision, some generalizations can be made. In most universities, for example, academic senates play little or no role in decisions about the size of the institution and the capital plan, and much larger roles in the determination of the curriculum, the certification of courses, and the criteria for earned degrees. Senate committees in many research universities play a substantial but not exclusive role in appointing and promoting faculty members, but less of a role in admitting undergraduates.

If we compare the kinds of decisions in which senates play a major role with the kinds of decisions made chiefly by university administrators, we see that senates are concerned primarily with maintaining and controlling the quality of the academic programs. Senates, on the whole, are much better at saying "no" than "yes," better at maintaining quality than taking initiatives, better at advising than at leading.

Cogovernance in American universities does not rest primarily on formal allocations of spheres of responsibility and authority but on informal arrangements and understandings about the relative weight to be attached to the advice of academic bodies in different spheres of activity and decision. The term really refers to the ongoing process of administrators consulting academicians, ordinarily through standing or ad hoc committees of faculty members organized through the machinery of an academic senate.

There is indeed a certain style of "leadership" to be learned through serving on these committees—especially through serving as chair-leadership in organizing the agenda, preparing materials, moving discussion along, and above all learning to formulate (or recognize) an emerging consensus and capturing it in a resolution before it disappears in further discussion and refinement. These skills are quite important in university governance and even may be helpful to university presidents, but they are not the skills of university leadership: the ability to see opportunities, take decisions, define goals, and mobilize support.

Why cannot senates lead? Why are American college and university presidents so powerful compared to their counterparts overseas? And why is the academic guild (and its academic senate) in American universities relatively weak? The answers are in part historical; in part they are a function of the responsiveness of American institutions to external demands for strong institutional leaders; and in part they are a result of the need for a strong force outside and above the senate and the academic departments that is able to make decisions about the allocation of resources among them.
The traditional "strong president" of American colleges and universities derives from our peculiar pattern of governance, which lodges ultimate authority over academic institutions in a lay board of trustees. The origins of this external board lie in the precedent set at Harvard University, where the founders had intended to "carry on the English tradition of resident-faculty control."[1] There simply did not exist a body of scholars in the early colonies, however, to be brought together to teach and govern themselves. A president could be found to take responsibility for the institution's operation, and he might find some young men to help him with instruction as tutors, but Harvard had been established for more than eighty-five years before it had its first professor, Yale for more than fifty. Indeed, for a very long time-well into the nineteenth century-"The only secure and sustained professional office in American collegiate education was that of the college president himself. He alone among the working teachers of the early colleges had, in the community and before the governing boards, the full stature of a man of learning. To this situation can be traced the singular role and importance of the American college or university president."[2]

The lay boards that established and governed American colleges and universities had to govern; there was no one else. They could appoint a president and, as busy men themselves, they had to delegate to him the day-to-day running of the institution. For a very long time, however, there was no body of learned men making academic life a career, and thus no challenge to the president's authority so long as he had the support of his board of trustees.

The nearly absolute authority of the American college and university president in the institution was lost over time, especially with the rise of the great research universities and the emergence of a genuine academic profession. In this century, especially in the stronger institutions, a great deal of authority over academic affairs has been delegated to the faculty and its senate. (We can still see the old pattern of presidential dictatorship in the weaker denominational college and in the reports of Committee A of the American Association of University Professors.)

But even in the leading American colleges and universities, where in the first decades of this century the most distinguished academicians translated the threat of "exit" into greater "voice,"[3] presidents are still more powerful than their European counterparts. This power has ensured, moreover, that when some universities grew in size and expanded their functions, the big bureaucratic staffs that arose to administer them would be an extension of the president's office rather than responsible to a faculty body or to state authorities. As a result, the skill and experience of creating and then effectively using a large administrative staff is not acquired through leadership of academic senates.

The strong American college and university president arose out of the weakness both of the academic profession and the state and has survived through the institutionalization of the lay governing board as its executive and administrative instrument. In addition, the strong president is necessary in institutions highly dependent on sources of external support that continually must be served and mobilized and can never be taken for granted. American colleges and universities are extremely sensitive to the competition in the marketplace for students and graduates and to their own ability to earn and retain support from private business and government through the services they can provide. That vulnerability (and sensitivity) to markets and opportunities calls for a strong chief executive officer who can respond quickly and with authority to challenges and opportunities in the environment as they arise.

European institutions, in contrast, are funded largely by the state and thus shielded from the uncertainties and challenges of markets and external constituencies and the need for entrepreneurial leadership.[4] Academic guilds are stronger when conditions are stable, when most decisions are made by custom and tradition, and when "governance" is merely the application of traditional norms and standards to familiar and repetitive events. Where the characteristics and mission of "the university" are clear, and where all the universities in the society are similar and similarly dependent on the state, the civil servants can manage their relatively simple administrative and financial affairs from outside the institutions in a fairly routine and predictable way while the intellectual life of the institution goes on with a certain measure of continuity. Or in another setting where institutions have relatively clear and stable functions, they can be governed from inside by committees of academicians, as in Oxford or Cambridge. The more unstable and uncertain are circumstances, the more necessary is the powerful executive and the more responsive must the institution be to a changing environment and an uncertain future.
Competitiveness, rapid change, and the uncertainty that arises from the absence of assured funding underlies the strength of American college and university presidents. They are also strengthened by our tradition that the college stands in loco parentis to the student, and by the large staffs that provide resulting student services. There is a widespread misconception that the principle of in loco parentis died in the student uprisings of the 1960s; in fact, it merely changed its character as the dean of students’ of-rice changed its name and expanded and shifted the basis of its authority from morality and seniority to technical skill.

This expanded administrative staff is not confined to student services; much of it tends to the extensive relations between the college or university and the environment on which it depends for support-looking after alumni relations, research administration, fund-raising, and much else-while also providing services to students in the form of financial aid, health care, remedial instruction, minority group support. This large staff is appointed by the president or the president's appointees and serves the president. It is a large item in every institution's budget, and provides the president with people and discretionary funds through which initiatives within both student services and academic programs can be launched.

Within this large administrative staff, there has emerged a relatively new group of "policy analysts," who provide advice to senior administrative officers regarding the direction of growth, internal allocation of funds, capital investment, and staff and faculty remuneration, among other things. Their advice is based on sophisticated analysis of masses of data by people trained (often in schools and departments of policy analysis) to solve problems and not just manage operations. Such people typically replace the older, familiar "administrative assistant" who knew what forms were required for everything and whose personal networks knit the organized anarchy of the institution together. Policy analysts have long served the president and senior vice presidents; they are now filtering down to the staffs of provosts, deans, and the chairs of big departments.

In contrast to the full-time professional staff, members of academic senate committees are part-time amateurs, usually with minimal staff support and dependent on the administration for the information-on enrollments, retention, staff and faculty turnover, budget, and so forth-necessary to make wise policy (or give wise advice) about the enterprise. Administrators provide such information to senate committees rather selectively, often on what they define as a "need-to-know" basis. As a result, these committees often do not have enough information to ask the right questions of administrators at the right time, and they are "consulted" after the basic decisions already have been made.

The large staffs at the service of the president-and especially the emergence of the role of policy analyst on those staffs-make the relationship between senate and "administration" increasingly unequal: a relationship between academic amateurs and professional administrators backed by highly professional staff work. The widening gulf in knowledge and competence is filled quite often by flattery and sincere, if increasingly hollow, declarations by presidents of the importance to them of the "thoughtful advice" of academic committees. Without the necessary facts, figures, staff support, and time, the advice of senate committees can be merely hortatory, reduced to generalities, retaining its chief value as a set of declarations, more or less eloquent, in support of traditional academic values and standards. At their best, senates and their committees do defend academic values and academic freedom, and resist the "managerialism" of an activist president and a partly professional, partly bureaucratic administrative staff. Beyond that, with respect to the great variety of "nonacademic" decisions that cumulatively shape the character and direction of academic institutions, the advice of academic senates is often tardy or incompetent.

All of this-as I see it-is not the result of a power play by university presidents or of their values being at odds with those of the faculty. It is rather that presidents and their staffs can do their increasingly complex jobs quite well (at least by their own lights) without senatorial advice, and rather better in many cases without (as they see it) largely amateur and irresponsible interventions by tenured faculty members who have more arrogance than competence in academic administration beyond the level of the department. This situation is widely perceived, and even more widely felt, by academicians and makes them increasingly reluctant to give up significant amounts of time and energy to senate activities, especially when such service appears to be not only irrelevant, but also of little value (or even of negative value) in advancing their academic careers.

**Dimensions of leadership**
Another way to assess the value of senate service as training for academic leadership is to examine the dimensions of college and university leadership? Leadership in higher education manifests itself chiefly along four dimensions:

- Symbolic leadership is the ability to express, to project—indeed, to seem to embody—the character of an institution, its central goals and values, in a powerful way. Internally, leadership of that kind explains and justifies the institution and its decisions to participants by linking its organization and processes to the larger purposes of teaching and learning in ways that strengthen their motivation and morale. Externally, a leader's ability to articulate clearly the nature and purposes of the institution helps to shape its image, affecting its capacity to gain support from its environment and to recruit able staff members and students.
- Political leadership refers to a leader's ability to resolve the conflicting demands and pressures of many constituents, internal and external, and to gain their support of the institution's goals and purposes as the leader defines them.
- Managerial leadership is the capacity to direct and coordinate the various support activities of the institution; this includes good judgment in the selection of staff members and the ability to develop and manage a budget, plan for the future, and build and maintain a plant.
- Academic leadership manifests itself, among other ways, as the ability to recognize excellence in teaching, learning, and research; in knowing where and how to intervene to strengthen academic structures; in the choice of able academic administrators and the support of their efforts to recruit and advance talented teachers and scholars.

Not all college and university presidents excel in all of these dimensions, of course, but leadership in academic senates is poor training for at least three of them: chairing an academic senate or one of its leading committees provides little occasion for learning the arts of symbolic leadership or the skills of political or administrative leadership. College deans, provosts, academic vice presidents, and scientists who have become science administrators, in contrast, are more likely to have practiced the skills that college and university presidents are called upon to exercise.

None of this precludes the possibility of successful leadership by academics whose only administrative experience is through activity in an academic senate. When that does occur, however, it occurs in spite of the absence of relevant experience. In my judgment, academic senates are useful for setting limits on the arbitrary power of deans, provosts, and presidents, but they are not effective schools for leadership in higher education.

4. That characterization was more accurate ten or twenty years ago. Increasingly in European countries, and dramatically in the United Kingdom, universities are being encouraged by governments to be more responsive to external requests and demands and more sensitive to markets. And as they move in this direction, they need and are getting stronger presidents with longer tenure and larger support staffs.

By MARTIN TROW

MARTIN TROW is professor of public policy at the University of California-Berkeley and has served as chair of Berkeley's academic senate and on many of its committees.

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