Faculty Governance


These days, colleges and universities are struggling to deal with rising costs, defaults on student loans, reduced appropriations from state and federal agencies, competition from for-profit institutions, the potential of digital technologies and a loss of public confidence in higher education. More often than not, Clark Kerr, the former president of the University of California, once noted, the first reaction of faculty is "to ignore (or deny)" what is happening, the second "has been for administrators to take band aid actions." While everything around them is changing, Kerr added, "The university mostly endures."

Although they maintain that universities have changed (albeit gradually), William Bowen, president emeritus of the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation and Princeton University, and Eugen Tobin, a senior program officer in the humanities at Mellon and a former president of Hamilton College, agree that institutions of higher education have been slow to adapt to this new world. In *Locus of Authority*, Bowen and Tobin make a compelling argument that "governance" -- the location and exercise of authority -- is in urgent need of reform.

Drawing on an historical overview of developments in higher education over the past 200 years and four fairly recent case studies (University of California, Princeton University, Macalester College and the City University of New York), Bowen and Tobin demonstrate that positive change in more likely to occur in a context of shared governance in which administrators, faculty and trustees avoid exclusive claims of "ownership" in key domains. *Locus of Authority* is worth reading less because of its specific recommendations than as an invitation to a conversation that is relevant to students, alumni and taxpayers as well as higher education "insiders."

A few examples. For more than a century, Bowen and Tobin point out, most colleges and universities have been organized vertically, "with the department as the key, largely self-contained unit." In the future, they speculate, a more horizontal approach will be preferable because key decisions will transcend department structures. The devil, of course, will be in the details. Should departments be the locus of authority for hiring, tenure and promotion decisions,
with input from ad hoc committees and deans (and a rubber stamp from trustees)? Should multi-
disciplinary "centers" and "institutes" (on, for example, sustainability or high energy physics),
which emphasize research, play a more substantive role? Should faculty approval be required
when new programs of study (or major modifications in existing programs) are proposed?
Should decisions to shut down programs, however, be the province of administrators and trustees
(following consultation with faculty) because, as Bowen and Tobin suggest, they are ultimately
responsible for priority setting, resource allocation and fund-raising?

Bowen and Tobin also believe that in the digital era, where large investments are needed and
institution-wide choices must be made about facilities, scheduling and prices, "It is time for
individual faculty to give up, cheerfully and not grudgingly, any claim to sole authority over
teaching methods of all kinds." In return, they should have "a seat at a bigger table," at which
decisions are made about the design of online platforms, the uses, on and off campus, of digital
technologies, and the ownership of the intellectual property that is produced. How big should
that seat be? And, with the exception of control over content, should "final authority" for these
complex matters be left with administrators and trustees?

Bowen and Tobin are surely right that implementing a fresh approach to governance in an ever-
changing academic landscape will be difficult. The focus of many research-oriented faculty has
shifted to the discipline (and its national and international organizations), often at the expense of
institutional loyalty. Faculty meetings are so poorly attended that many institutions don't
schedule them (and set up mechanisms for professors to vote electronically). Many faculty have
willingly relinquished authority in many areas, including student affairs, to "the professionals."
Always a factor, inertia seems especially potent these days. And adjunct faculty, whose numbers
are increasing dramatically, have few incentives to spend time on campus concerns.

For many reasons, Bowen and Tobin write, professors "often resist thinking hard about costs and
trade-offs until it is too late." On the other hand, administrators and trustees often exaggerate
faculty resistance "as the daunting obstacle."

The authors understand as well that a substantive conversation, with candid exchanges about
what is working and not working, is likely to be contentious. After all, agreement that shared
governance does not mean compartmentalized or divided governance is only a beginning. And
trust is, indeed, a critically important but elusive determinant of success and failure.