

Case Studies
March 2017

Shared Governance: Changing with the Times

Case Study: State University of New York

Background

The State University of New York (SUNY) is the largest comprehensive system of public higher education in the United States, comprising 64 campuses with nearly six hundred thousand students and over ninety-thousand employees (roughly thirty-four thousand faculty and almost fifty-six thousand staff). Needless to say, the sheer size, complexity, and geographic dispersion of the system presents myriad challenges to effective system-wide shared governance. And in spite of these challenges, it appears that SUNY, under the leadership of Chancellor Nancy Zimpher, has made shared governance a central theme—one that is manifested in substance—throughout the system.

In a special issue of the *Faculty Senate Bulletin* dedicated to shared governance in 2012, Kenneth O'Brien, then president of the University Faculty Senate (UFS), wrote:

Ten years ago, the SUNY shared governance system was in tatters, with a Board that seemed more engaged in criticizing parts of university life and practice than representing its interests to other crucial constituencies. The legitimate oversight function that every Board must play to meet its responsibilities had been abandoned for a closed system of micro-managers, each intent on making certain that his or her vision dominated some area of university life. And, with weakened senior academic leadership, the system was dysfunctional at its highest levels.

*Today, that is past.*¹ [emphasis added]

Professor O'Brien goes on to say very positive things about SUNY's current board and administration at the time of his writing, noting that while things are not perfect, "I believe we are in the best position in decades to work through to solution."²

In the same issue of the *Faculty Senate Bulletin*, in an article entitled "Shared Governance Drives Our Greatest Accomplishments," Dr. Zimpher noted:

Shared governance in higher education refers to the structures and processes through which administration, faculty, professional staff, governing boards, and students participate in the development of policies and in decisions that affect the whole institution. Carried out effectively, shared governance serves as the foundation for a sustainable system of higher education that is operating at its highest potential in service to each of these groups as well as its other stakeholders in government, businesses, and communities.³

Of particular note in this statement is the fact that, while the 1966 AAUP *Joint Statement on Government* assigns formal governance roles solely to the board, the president, and the faculty, Dr. Zimpher identifies staff and students as participants in the system's governance processes.

¹ *Faculty Senate Bulletin: Special Issue on Shared Governance*, "State University of New York Faculty Senate, October 2012, p. 4.

² *Ibid.*, 4.

³ *Ibid.*, 4.

Actions Taken

In 2010, SUNY's strategic plan for the next decade, entitled *The Power of SUNY*, was approved by the board of trustees. As a critical component of the plan's implementation, the chancellor created a Shared Governance Transformation Team, co-chaired by the presidents of the University Faculty Senate and the Faculty Council of Community Colleges (FCCC). The team included two campus presidents, faculty members from all campus sectors, and members of the administration. The charge to the team was as follows:

The Transformation Team was charged with examining the current patterns and procedures for shared governance across SUNY, including those within System Administration. After this review, the team was to conduct research and recommend foundational documents, policies and processes to strengthen effective shared governance throughout SUNY.⁴

On the basis of this work, the Shared Governance Transformation Team was also charged with making recommendations for documents, policies and procedures that would strengthen shared governance system-wide.

Outcomes

The consequences of the Shared Governance Transformation Team's work, and of the chancellor's strong commitment to broad-based, inclusive shared governance are wide-ranging and pervasive. The many structural consequences include:

- The presidents of the UFS, the FCCC, and the system-wide Student Assembly are members of the chancellor's cabinet
- All three presidents are members of the board of trustees; the student president is a voting member; while the faculty presidents are not voting members, their participation in board discussions is actively sought and valued
- The student life committee of the board of trustees is co-chaired by the student trustee
- The chancellor regularly appoints task forces of a representative group of stakeholders (staff, students, faculty, board members) to make policy recommendations to her and to the board; recent foci of these task forces have included diversity issues, seamless transfer between the two- and four-year institutions, and Title XI/sexual assault concerns

One of the most powerful—and innovative—outcomes of the Shared Governance Transformation Team's work has been the establishment of an annual convening (now biennial), *SUNY Voices*, a two-day meeting to which trustees, the presidents of all sixty-four campuses, the presidents of all sixty-four faculty senates and staff councils, and the members of the UFS and the FCCC are invited. As Chancellor Zimpher noted in her article in the *Faculty Senate Bulletin*:

The objectives of *SUNY Voices* are twofold—to increase visibility of our focus on shared governance given the unique and complex nature of the SUNY system, and to improve communication and shared decision-making processes throughout SUNY. Specifically, SUNY

⁴ http://system.suny.edu/media/suny/content-assets/documents/powerofsuny/the-process-of-the-power-of-suny/SharedGovernance_20110408.pdf, p. 1.

Shared Governance Case Study: State University of New York (SUNY)

Voices will include a new website that will support our work and serve as a forum for discussions on the topic; regular publications; and, scheduled workshops and presentations at orientations and meetings like that of new trustees, council members, and campus governance leaders as well as the UFS and FCCC plenaries.

At the *SUNY Voices* conference, one system campus is recognized with an award for particular achievement in the area of shared governance, and their work is disseminated as a model throughout the system.

The third *SUNY Voices* conference will take place in April 2017. Reflecting Chancellor Zimpher's impending retirement, the focus of the conference is "Continuity in Shared Governance in Times of Leadership Change." Themes of the conference sessions include:

- Lessons learned—how campuses strengthen shared governance through a time of leadership change
- Sustaining shared governance with new administrations
- Understanding the faculty role in presidential/administrative searches
- Exploring how student governments create and sustain leadership amid the challenge of continuous changes
- Shared governance and academic freedom
- Melding shared governance and Middle States accreditation
- Discussing shared governance from a presidential standpoint
- The challenges of trusteeship for students and community leaders
- Faculty/student collaboration with governing boards⁵

Under the *SUNY Voices* banner, the system regularly provides a "Student & Faculty Governance Workshop," which faculty/student "governance leader pairs" are encouraged to attend. The 2016 workshop focused on "Working Together to Improve Campus Climate:"

We will engage in conversations about some of the key issues that many of us are facing on campus this year, particularly around such questions as the climate for students of diverse backgrounds, the tensions between freedom of speech/academic freedom and the growing awareness of micro-aggressions, threats on social media, sexual assault, and/or other issues brought forward for discussion.⁶

Also sponsored by the *SUNY Voices* initiative is a "Campus Governance Leadership Institute." The Institute is open to all campus governance leaders, and hosted jointly by the FCCC, the UFS, and the Student Assembly. As the announcement for the 2016 Institute reads:

Both leaders who are recently elected and veteran leaders will benefit from this institute as we work together to discuss the nuts and bolts of governance and campus leadership, challenges facing governance and our campuses, and strategies for working together to meet those challenges. Even faculty and students who are interested in becoming governance leaders on

⁵ <https://www.suny.edu/about/shared-governance/sunyvoices/conference/#d.en.8256>

⁶ <https://www.suny.edu/about/shared-governance/sunyvoices/student--faculty-governance-workshop/>

their campuses will benefit from the institute and meeting with fellow faculty and student leaders.⁷

In addition, SUNY provides an on-line “Campus Governance Leaders Toolkit” that provides information on topics that include:

- What are my duties and role as a CGL? [campus governance leader]
- What is shared governance?
- How does Academic Freedom link to shared governance?
- How do I run an effective meeting?
- Where can I go for more help and resources?⁸

There are challenges with which the SUNY system is still grappling—challenges that it shares with virtually every other institution and system in the country. The current president of the UFS, Dr. Peter Knuepfer, pointed to two issues of concern: 1) the eroding faculty engagement in shared governance because of competing demands on time; and 2) the fact that contingent faculty commonly are not represented in the governance structure which—among other things—puts increasing pressure on tenure-track faculty who already have advising, research and other responsibilities.⁹ At the same time—not surprisingly—the effectiveness of shared governance on the system’s sixty-four campuses is somewhat varied and, as Chancellor Zimpher noted, “We need to do better in charging the campus presidents to employ the same high standards for shared governance that we do at the system level.”¹⁰ (Note: the effectiveness of shared governance on each campus is a component of each president’s annual evaluation)

In interviews with the board chair, the UFS president, and the student assembly president, all three emphasized the critical leadership role that Chancellor Zimpher has played in the strengthening, expansion and effectiveness of shared governance. Of particular note is the chancellor’s emphasis on “systemness”—the notion that even a system as complex as SUNY must find ways to function as a coherent whole. In terms of shared governance, it certainly does appear that SUNY has achieved a significant level of “systemness.”

Lessons Learned

- Leadership matters—both in substance and symbol, in words and in action; “the willingness of the Chancellor to recognize the importance of shared governance and lift it up”¹¹ has been essential to SUNY’s accomplishments
- “The real indicator of whether or not shared governance is working is whether or not action steps are put in place and are effective”¹²

⁷ <https://www.suny.edu/about/shared-governance/sunyvoices/campus-governance-leaders-institute/>

⁸ <https://www.suny.edu/about/shared-governance/sunyvoices/cgl-toolkit/>

⁹ Personal conversation, November 15, 2016

¹⁰ Knuepfer, December 6, 2016

¹¹ Knuepfer, November 15, 2016

¹² Zimpher, December 6, 2016

Shared Governance Case Study: State University of New York (SUNY)

- “It is important to recognize limits, and not try to push people past what they’re willing to do; you have to recognize as a leader that there will be times when you probably will not achieve all that you set out to achieve”¹³
- Ongoing substantive conversations about and assessments of shared governance by their very fact strengthen shared governance
- While boards, presidents/chancellors, and faculty retain their traditional responsibilities and authorities in the shared governance model, truly effective shared governance and decision making in a 21st-century context includes—and values—the voices of all stakeholders
- Resources—such as workshops, conferences, and online materials—can greatly enhance the effectiveness of participation by faculty, students, and staff in shared governance.

¹³ Knuepfer, November 15, 2016