The Blessing and Curse of Shared Governance

Building Cathedrals

Faculty participation in governance promotes and encourages diversity of ideas, a sense of shared responsibility, collaboration, collegiality, and institutional excellence, and is essential to the well-being of the University. (University of Michigan Faculty Handbook)

The above statement reflects the traditional belief among the professoriate that faculty governance is an indispensable component of academic freedom and institutional quality in higher education. According to this belief, all members of academic communities, but especially the faculty, share the responsibility for protecting the uninhibited flow of ideas and ensuring that academic priorities are not automatically subordinated to budget and practical considerations. Implicit in this view is the idea of ownership. Students, alumni, staff members, and, especially, faculty members are the true “owners” of the institution. In fact, professors often see themselves not as employees of the organization but as the organization itself, much as the U.S. Supreme Court is taken
to be the nine justices and not the building, library, and staff attorneys. Thus, professors clearly differentiate their governance role from that of department heads, center directors, deans, vice presidents, presidents, and other administrative officers; they see administrators as the institution’s caretakers, whose responsibility is to keep the school running smoothly and to follow the lead of the faculty on matters academic.

Also implicit in this view is the idea of harmony. An ideal university is a place where members of the community respect each other, celebrate their differences, and welcome each other’s views, however unconventional. The members of university communities are building cathedrals, not carrying stones, and they are unified by their shared commitment to a noble societal good. To make this vision work, it is believed necessary that faculty members be given a major voice in decision making, be consulted on all substantive matters, and be the primary source of academic innovation and inspiration. The collective wisdom of the faculty, if not sacrosanct, is at least thought to be more considered than the judgment of administrators, who may be too preoccupied with day-to-day chores and problems to give adequate priority to larger academic values. In this view, the primacy of the faculty underlies the durability of colleges and universities; corporations come and go, but the great universities of the world endure for centuries.

Shaky Foundations

Faculty participation in governance promotes and encourages the rule of mediocrity, perpetuates the status quo, engenders mistrust between the faculty and the administration, and leads to a wasteful use of time and resources that is detrimental to the well-being of the university.

The above statement originates in no faculty handbook, but it captures the sentiments of many critics outside academia’s walls. To many elected officials, business leaders, and observers of higher education, panegyrics on the sanctity of faculty governance are disingenuous and self-serving. Underlying the faculty embrace of the concept, critics say, is not so much the advancement of lofty educational goals and a collegial environment as a desire for control—specifically, professors’ wishes to insulate themselves from “management,” to resist efforts to regulate their activities, and to circumvent the accountability that is the hallmark of professional employment outside academia. To critics, the benefits of shared governance do not compensate for its practical shortcomings. Whereas professors see the concept almost as a high moral imperative, observers outside the academy often see it as a root cause of public dissatisfaction with higher education and a key factor in the rising cost of a college degree.

Costs are high, in the view of critics, because the shared governance model is intrinsically inefficient. When decisions are made only after broad consultation and extensive discussion, and when committees replace individuals as decision makers, then an organization’s personnel costs are unavoidably great and the responsiveness of the organization is unavoidably slow. Furthermore, the search for broad consensus makes universities resistant to change. John V. Lombardi, president of the Louisiana State University system, is one of many national academic leaders to have commented on this intrinsic conservatism. Consensus, he believes, “normally results in modest and superficial change,” in part because it tends to level out the distribution of resources and in part because it engenders a lowest-common-denominator attitude toward improvement: “Universities that are already high performers benefit from this conservatism. They have a consensus for high performance and high standards the conservative predisposition maintains. Universities that are merely good, have a consensus for good standards, but not for high standards. The conservatism will keep them good, but they rarely will make the considerable and often unpopular effort required to increase their standards to match those of excellent universities.”

The Corporate Alternative

Any criticism of university governance inevitably contrasts it with the hierarchical governance model of the business world. The virtues of corporate governance—unity of mission, efficiency, adaptability, and willingness to take risks—are in the view of many precisely the qualities that universities and colleges need to embrace. Furthermore, advocates argue, corporate governance is far more collaborative than many academics acknowledge. Every large business has numerous committees, consults with its employees, and works to engender a sense of ownership and participation in its workforce. The supposed “top-down” management style is not the monolithic dictatorial structure that is sometimes portrayed by academia. Why then would universities and colleges not benefit by embracing the key features of this model?
The answer is that corporate governance is not compatible with the functional complexity of academic institutions. Universities encompass nearly all areas of human knowledge, and administrators cannot make informed decisions about all these disciplines for the simple reason that "complete understanding of the scope and complexity of the enterprise exceeds human cognitive ability." Revising the curriculum, recognizing research opportunities, assessing faculty credentials, modifying academic standards, and evaluating student achievement in areas as diverse, say, as medieval history and organic chemistry require comprehensive understanding that no small group of administrators could ever possess. This need argues for a decentralized decision-making mechanism that entails consultation with those who have specialized knowledge.

Furthermore, universities are socially more complex than most institutions. Not only does the age range of the community span six decades, but the values, priorities, traditions, ways of thinking, communication patterns, and educational styles and philosophies vary enormously among the academic disciplines. Business professors have a unique perspective on their profession that grows out of their training and experience, as do professors of education or, in my case, experimental physics. Shared governance is a mechanism for arbitrating among all the disparate viewpoints, styles, and perspectives and keeping them in balance.

Finally, a university society, despite its intellectual and social diversity, is highly interconnected, so that most decisions have wide-ranging consequences. For example, changes to the academic calendar can affect faculty sabbatical plans, student employment and internship opportunities, long-scheduled athletic events, the registrar's schedule, the bursar's office and fee collection schedules, the timing of financial aid awards, and the plans of conferences, workshops, and summer camps. An important function of shared governance is to minimize adverse unintended consequences. Thus, while the corporate model offers the benefits of versatility and economy, it could not be easily carried over into an academic environment without most likely creating more problems than it would solve.

But the real issue is not a matter of choosing between two alternatives. The issue is whether shared governance is a sacred cow that is so reflexively protected by its advocates that they are blind to its shortcomings, just as its campus critics are intimidated into remaining silent about their concerns. At its core, shared governance is simply a methodology for managing a particular kind of diverse and complex organization, and like any methodology, it can go awry if implemented poorly.

How Shared Governance Fails

Almost every week the Chronicle of Higher Education reports a governance meltdown at an institution of higher learning, often resulting in an angry standoff between the faculty and the administration. When these unfortunate events occur, an institution's trustees have little choice but to intervene, in extreme cases dismissing the president or, alternately, siding with the president against the faculty, as did the trustees of Trinity College (now Duke University) in a resolution passed in June 1893:

Whereas: the Board of Trustees of Trinity College, being impressed with the necessity for harmony and co-operation between the President and the Faculty of the institution, and having learned by experience that a head, invested with full authority is imperatively necessary to the success of the College, therefore: Resolved 1. That the Faculty in its official relations to the College is expected to be under the control and guidance of the President, and that he be governed by their advice only so far as his good judgment may determine. Resolved 2. That this Board pledges itself to renewed zeal in support of the President and the institution.

But the signature of the most common governance failure is not an embarrassing public crisis. Rather, the most common failure is pervasive and incremental dysfunction: the institution or school or department does not solve its problems, or build on academic strengths, or strategically focus resources and capitalize on opportunities. This "soft" failure of governance is insidious, because its root causes cannot be fixed by firing the president or dean or department chair, or negotiating an agreement, or striking a compromise. Rather, its causes are symptomatic of a process that has not worked as intended.

Consider, for example, this story of a small academic department at a public university that for many years had been viewed as a problem area by the institution's central administration. The department's faculty had a reputation for quarreling and filing spurious grievances against each other. The department's curriculum was viewed as undemanding, with a proliferation of easy courses and high grades. These low academic standards were also reflected in the department's grad-
The provost believed that these accusations were unfair and inaccurate. She became frustrated and disappointed not only at the unwillingness of the senate and her other faculty colleagues to support her initiative but also by how quickly and unexpectedly she had found herself on trial. She was surprised that the debate had suddenly changed direction—that the campus discussion was no longer about the wisest course of action for a troubled academic unit but about the alleged shortcomings of her leadership. In the end, beset by criticism seemingly from all directions, the provost had little choice but to back away from her plan. So far as I know, the troubled department is still there, largely intact, continuing to waste resources, continuing to promote inferior faculty members, and doing a disservice both to students and to the university’s reputation.

Scenarios like this prompt criticism about the inability of universities to accommodate needed change. To outside observers, it appeared that the faculty’s negative reaction to the provost’s reasonable proposal was proof positive of the shortcomings of shared governance. But the point that is frequently missed is that while shared governance at that university had indeed failed, the failure had occurred long before the provost had ever announced her plan. It had failed because the quality controls built into that university’s governance system had not worked. Over the years, departmental committees had recommended poorly qualified candidates for tenure. Prior deans and provosts’ faculty advisory committees had failed to challenge the weak dossiers, and earlier generations of administrators had rubber-stamped their recommendations. Over the years, new faculty positions in the department had been approved by deans, as had the department’s budget requests, course offerings, degree requirements, and rules of departmental governance. In many of these areas, members of the administration had been guided by faculty committees.

In other words, this dysfunctional department was not the real issue. It was a symptom of a more entrenched problem, and that was the long-term failure of the university’s administration and faculty alike to discharge their governance obligations responsibly. Although no single decision makes or breaks an institution, the cumulative impact of such decisions is ultimately what determines a university’s quality. In this case, the provost, despite her best intentions, was simply not able to undo the damage that had been accumulating for many years. This is the conservatism about which John Lombardi writes. Problems at universities often remain unsolved because decision-making is so decentral-
ized and diffuse that a single leader, no matter how sensible, motivated, and visionary, can contravene the accumulated failures that led to the problems.

But let us suppose that in this example the ground had been meticulously prepared before the provost had announced her proposal. Suppose that a formal program review conducted by impartial outside scholars had assessed the weaknesses of the department and that the department had been given ample prior opportunities to fix itself. Suppose that the provost had previously initiated an elaborate formal consultation procedure, with all interested constituencies invited to comment on the department’s future, and that an extended period of campus debate on the provost’s plan had taken place. In other words, let us imagine that all conceivable avenues of consultation, debate, opinion seeking, and due process had been exhausted. What then? After the dust had settled, months or years later, would the university have been able finally to resolve the problem of its weak department?

Possibly—universities and colleges with strong academic leadership do occasionally merge or shut down weak academic units—but that is certainly not a given. Shared governance ensures that all voices are heard, but it does not ensure closure. Difficult decisions are inherently controversial, and in academia, the tradition of broad community involvement is especially effective at keeping controversy alive. Because decisions about closing programs or reallocating resources or altering priorities ultimately reduce to matters of judgment, these can always be challenged. From the perspective of persons whose ox stands to be gored, there is never enough consultation, never enough objective scrutiny, never enough reasoned discourse. Many a seasoned university administrator, after a valiant effort to redress a serious institutional weakness, has simply thrown up his or her hands in frustration and walked away from the problem.

What Price Shared Governance?

Time Is Money

The Washington, D.C.—based company Covington and Burling, LLP, founded in 1919, is one of America’s premier law firms, with a roster of blue-chip clients that includes Bank of America, General Electric, Microsoft, IBM, and many other of the household names of American industry. The six hundred-plus attorneys at Covington and Burling partition their working days into six-minute segments, using a sophisticated computer system that not only adds up their minutes but tracks phone calls, conferences, correspondence, memos, e-mails, and faxes and automatically tallies the totals, which are then duly charged to a client’s account. The partners at Covington and Burling understand very well that time is money, and one can presume that this concept is also brought home to the company’s clients whenever they scrutinize their sizable monthly invoices.

From Covington and Burling it is a short twelve-minute taxi ride to Georgetown University, the venerable Jesuit institution founded at the time of the French Revolution, where more than forty of Covington and Burling’s partners and associates received
their law training. At Georgetown, there is no effort made to account formally for professors' time. The Georgetown faculty come and go at will, devote as much or as little time to their courses and research as they choose, and do not track the hours spent on committee service, writing letters of recommendation, drafting book manuscripts or articles for professional journals, meeting with colleagues or students, talking on the phone, or composing e-mails. At Georgetown, as at virtually every other university in the country, there is little sense among professors that time is money. Furthermore, one can safely assume that the Georgetown undergraduates who pay for that time, to the tune of $37,536 a year in 2008–9, have only the slightest idea of what their money is going for.

Students probably do not know, for example, that their tuition dollars pay for the monthly meetings of the Georgetown University Faculty Senate, a legislative body nearly as large as the United States Senate, four miles away. The Georgetown body's eighty-one senators (in 2008–9) are drawn from the school's main campus, its medical and law centers (each of which has a caucus that meets regularly), and (ex officio) the central administration. The senate has numerous standing committees, such as the eight-member Academic Freedom and Responsibility Committee, the twenty-two-member Budget and Finance Committee, and the nine-member University Governance Committee. There are, in addition, periodic ad hoc committees, such as the eight-member Ad Hoc Committee on Faculty Career Flexibility, which met for a year in 2006–7 and then issued a final report whose only recommendation was to create a new Faculty Career Flexibility Advisory Committee, to meet for an additional two years. The Georgetown Faculty Senate also appoints members to other university committees and councils, forty-two in all, including the Faculty Club Advisory Committee, the Committee on Investments and Social Responsibility, the Performing Arts Advisory Council, and the University Committee on Rank and Tenure.

Members of the Georgetown University Faculty Senate are, with the exception of a handful of ex officio administrators, elected to three-year terms by their faculty constituencies. As is true elsewhere in academia, faculty senate elections are mostly characterized by voter disinterest. For example, in the spring election of 2006, thirteen main campus candidates at Georgetown vied for ten senate vacancies. Nearly 70 percent of those eligible to vote did not return ballots, and of the ten senators who won election, five were already members. In most campus legislative bodies, it is common to find a core group of professors who stand for reelection repeatedly and may serve for a decade or longer.

On February 12, 2007, the University Faculty Senate held its monthly meeting to consider various items of business. Nearly 60 percent of the senators missed the meeting, but those present heard a report on several minor revisions to the faculty handbook and were notified that the university president had created a new committee "to assist and advise with respect to proposed [future] modifications to the Handbook." Senators were reassured that faculty members would be part of this new Handbook Council and that the council's charge would be brought to the faculty senate in order that senators could comment and debate it.

The senators also heard reports on the operations of the Faculty Ombuds Office and on the status of the university budget, the highlight of which was that the university had ended the 2006 fiscal year with a net operating loss of almost $4 million. After meeting for nearly two hours, the senate adjourned. As the senators walked out the door of their meeting hall, it likely did not occur to any of them to wonder how much impact their meeting had had on the magnitude of the university's deficit or whether the business they had accomplished in the meeting actually justified the thousands of dollars of faculty and administrator time that had been expended for it.

Georgetown University follows a pattern of faculty governance that is typical for American universities, both public and private. But if the rest of America's colleges and universities are marching to the same drumbeat as Georgetown, then what can be said generally about the impact of shared governance on the cost of a college education? To begin to answer this question, we can observe that if time is not valued as an identifiable financial resource, then there is no fiscal incentive to ration it or to make certain it is expended efficiently and productively. When a dollar value is attached to any proposed expenditure, tradeoffs and other options become immediately apparent. Should we take a family vacation to Cancun this year, or would we be better off replacing our old bedroom furniture? Shall we upgrade to Business Class or rent a fancier hotel room at our destination? Organizations and individuals are constantly making these kinds of decisions, because the dollar valuation of options provides a benchmark for making choices. In fact, comparative prices underlie the fundamental concept behind budgeting. A budget is merely a systematic way of assigning priorities and rankings to poten
tial expenditures, using each expenditure's dollar valuation as a unifying bridge. Prices are what make it possible to compare apples to oranges.

But in higher education, faculty and staff labor is not explicitly valued, except as a lump sum in the university budget. Which is better, to have a ten-person curriculum committee or to get by with a five-person curriculum committee and use the saved money to give a scholarship to a talented student? Or to replace an obsolete computer? Or to send a professor to an important professional conference? Or to pass along the savings to students by reducing their tuition charges? Such questions are not raised in academia, because labor is treated as a fixed cost and not as a resource to be judiciously expended. Of course, because faculty and staff members are paid regardless of whether they slave away like dogs or sit gazing out their office window, it may seem that there is no real savings when a committee is reduced from ten to five members. But in aggregate, when the work of the university can be carried out by fewer people, none working any harder or longer than before, then the savings can be appreciable. If, say, seven hundred faculty members can do the same work that formerly took eight hundred, then the savings can be redirected into salary increases, larger operating budgets, or reduced tuition charges. When productivity and efficiency in an organization increase, everybody wins.

But practically speaking, how much money are we talking about? And, equally important, what sacrifices to the academic culture of freedom and autonomy would be required to reap these savings? I believe it is safe to assert that few professors would respond positively to a request that they account for their time in six-minute increments. I will defer the second question to the next section and take up here, using my own university as an example, the question about dollars.

**Case History: The Cost of Shared Governance at Miami University**

In 2004, Miami University had 193 standing committees above the departmental level.³ Of these, 64 were associated with the University Senate, and the remainder were college- and school-level committees. There were 1,353 university employees, mostly professors, who served on these committees, which averages out to 7 per committee. In addition, 54 university employees served on the University Senate, 18 served on the Council on Student Affairs, and 13 served on the Graduate Coun-

cil, which brings the total up to 1,438 members. Search committees for deans and vice presidents and ad hoc committees and councils added 95 more employees to the numbers, bringing the total to 1,533.

In addition, each of the university's 45 academic departments had an average that year of 12 committees, with 5 members per committee, for a total of 2,700 members. Adding this to the earlier number brings the grand total of nonstudent committee members in 2004 up to 4,233. That number does not include purely administrative committees, like the Council of Academic Deans, the President's Executive Committee, or any of the many committees in Business and Finance, University Advancement, Information Technology, Admissions and Financial Aid, the Provost's Office, Intercollegiate Athletics, and so forth.

In 2004, the university spent an average of $87 to pay for one hour of faculty or staff committee time, which means that a six-person committee meeting for two hours cost the university more than a thousand dollars. Per-person University Senate expenses were proportionally higher because of additional administrative support costs. The university ended up spending $112 for every minute the University Senate met, or about $13,400 per meeting. The Senate normally met weekly, with a monthly cost of about $54,000, not counting the meeting costs of the Senate's standing committees or executive committee.

If we assume that each of the university's 4,233 committee members spent an average of one hour per week on their assigned committees—probably an underestimate—then in the course of an academic year, committee service at the university absorbed about 150,000 hours of labor, roughly equivalent to that of 125 full-time faculty members, or about 15 percent of the total faculty. This committee work took about $13 million out of the university's annual budget, not counting the amount spent to provide the meeting rooms, maintenance, staff support, and other overhead expenses. These dollars were essentially invisible; they were not budgeted for, appeared in no ledger book or spreadsheet, were never taken into account by any of the committee members or chairpersons, and were not a factor in the decision to create any of these committees or to structure their agendas. Furthermore, nobody ever inquired whether all the debates, motions approved and denied, decisions made, and other outcomes of this collective effort represented good value for the students and taxpayers who ultimately paid for them.

The question of value is partly a matter of relative efficiency. A committee that meets no longer than necessary, with a clear and focused
agenda, with members who are knowledgeable and thoughtfully chosen, and with a well-prepared chairperson who conducts the meeting in a crisp, businesslike manner, obviously brings better value to bill payers than a committee that reflects none of these things.

But in academia, the question of value is muddied by the intentional symbolism of shared governance. For example, when a university searches for a senior administrator, such as a provost, the search committee may have fifteen or more members, and although these individuals are undoubtedly highly regarded in the community, many of them have little or no idea what a provost actually does or what skills are necessary to do the job well. Instead of being selected for their expertise, the committee members are chosen to portray a symbolic balance. Thus, there will be representatives from the humanities, sciences, and major professional programs, in rough proportion to their sizes in the institution. The members will also be parsed by race and gender, in order to make a statement about the institution’s commitment to diversity. The committee will have faculty members (untenured and tenured), deans or other senior administrators, clerical staff, undergraduate and graduate students, and possibly alumni, and if there are branch campuses, they will also have a voice, as will the major legislative bodies, such as faculty and student senates.

It can be a major challenge to structure such committees so that no group feels disenfranchised. When I appointed committees, my staff and I would draw a large grid on a blackboard, each column labeled for a constituency group. The name of each proposed committee member would start a row on the grid, with a check mark in the boxes representing each constituency the person belonged to. Particularly desirable were candidates who fell into many constituencies, e.g., African American, female, assistant professor of engineering. At most campuses, multiple-constituency faculty members can have such heavy committee assignments that their scholarship and teaching are harmed.

It is a common experience for those who appoint search committees to begin with aspirations of creating a small “working” committee but then to find that complaints from the campus compel them to add members. The important point is that the stated goal of finding the best candidate often succumbs to the community pressure for broad participation. These two objectives tend to be in conflict. Not only can large committees be nearly unworkable from the perspective of organizing meetings and having productive group discussions, but such committees are also frequently drawn to lowest-common-denominator candidates whose primary attribute may be the ability to present themselves as outgoing, affable, and nonthreatening to any of the represented constituencies. I will discuss this phenomenon in a later chapter about presidential leadership.

And so the question of value comes down primarily to a matter of perspective. From the perspective of the faculty and other constituent groups in academia, cumbersome and slow governance procedures are necessary to protect the important principles of democratic participation and faculty autonomy. This philosophical commitment to principle is facilitated by higher education’s budgeting framework, which conceals the actual costs of governance and conveys the impression that time is freely expandable. But in reality, the cost of shared governance is very high, in terms of both the actual dollar cost and the resulting tradeoffs. At public universities especially, those tradeoffs eventually translate into lagging salaries and deteriorating working conditions. In one sense it is ironic that those most negatively affected are often those who would protect most strongly the system that contributes to their suffering.

But the important question is not whether shared governance in higher education should be sacrificed to the gods of efficiency and cost reduction. The question, rather, is whether shared governance procedures can be modified in a way that enhances efficiency and reduces costs but also preserves the essential principles of faculty freedom and collaboration. If, for example, the work done by the 4,233 committee members at Miami University in 2004 had been done by 3,000 committee members, thus permitting hundreds of professors to spend more time advising students, writing books, drafting research proposals, and preparing for their classes, I believe the overall quality of the committee work would not have declined and might actually have improved. In that event, both the faculty and staff, and the students and taxpayers they serve, would all have benefited. 4

In chapter 13 I will propose ways to streamline university service activities by providing incentives to reduce committee size and eliminate marginally useful committee activities. The idea will be to implement a simple budgeting tool that quantifies the actual costs of governance. Once the costs are known explicitly, committee service and other types of governance activities can be budgeted for as is any other expenditure, with the value of their contributions juxtaposed against other institutional priorities and needs.
lization rates been increasing or decreasing? In the fiscal area, has the department been living within its budget? What is its pattern of carry-forward year-end balances? How do equipment expenditures, travel expenditures, maintenance costs, and faculty salaries compare to those in other departments? Have alumni been generous in their gifts to the department?

The dean also needs to know answers to important nonquantitative questions. How well does the department mentor its junior faculty? Has the department been successful in filling faculty appointments with top-notch candidates? Is the department faculty collegial and united? Are the department's promotion and tenure recommendations candid and believable? Is the department chairperson a go-getter who is willing to set limits and make unpopular decisions in order to advance the department?

The answers to such questions can provide administrators with an understanding of the health and vitality of an academic unit. Most provosts and deans have a general idea about the performance of the major departments in their institution, but when one considers that a large public university can have a hundred academic departments spread over several campuses, a weak information-gathering system means that hearsay and subjective impressions too often form the basis for administrative decisions that can entail hundreds of thousands or even millions of dollars.

Thus an important step a university can take to become more efficient and productive is to improve its information and data-gathering systems. Most universities and colleges already collect a wide range of data about teaching, finances, research, student life, personnel, and auxiliary support services. Furthermore, most universities conduct a formal program review of individual academic units every few years. The challenge, therefore, is not so much to collect the raw data as to collate, organize, and present it in a way that supports administrative decisions. Upgrading the decision-making infrastructure should be a clear priority for institutions struggling to adjust to a changing environment.

How to Streamline University Decision-Making

In the election of November 2006, the voters of the State of Ohio approved Issue 5, a statute banning smoking in and near the state's public buildings. The passage of Issue 5 raised several compliance issues for Ohio's public universities. While the law clearly prohibited smoking in campus buildings and environs, it left open the question of smoking in parking lots, gardens, walkways, and so forth. Thus, the passage of Issue 5 provided an opportunity for the public universities in Ohio to review their antismoking policies. Should a university comply narrowly with the law and prohibit smoking only in and around its buildings, or should it comply more broadly with the spirit of the law and extend the smoking ban throughout the campus?

These kinds of administrative decisions come up almost daily in academia. Such decisions have nothing to do with academic freedom. Classroom content is not at stake, nor is the right to pursue knowledge for its own sake, nor is the right to speak out and voice opinions on any subject. But a campus antismoking policy is one of a class of issues that has the potential for creating campus controversy, albeit in this case a minor controversy. The larger question, therefore, is how universities should go about making decisions that are potentially controversial. In this instance, Miami University's response was to conduct a formal survey of campus opinion on the subject and create a university senate ad hoc committee on smoking. The committee met for a semester and then recommended a campuswide smoking ban as well as a variety of other measures to help campus smokers shake their habit. These recommendations were accepted by the president and eventually passed on to the board of trustees for final approval.\(^1\)

In academia, administrators tend to avoid taking potentially controversial actions unilaterally, since doing so would likely draw the charge that they have ignored the collaborative expectations of the shared governance doctrine. Thus, in this example, rather than making the smoking policy decision themselves or delegating it to the human resources office, Miami University administrators passed the responsibility to a large committee. Passing decisions to committees as a way to temper public criticism is a common pattern in academic administration. The rationale is that broadly representative committee-based decisions are more likely to be accepted by the community than are unilateral administrative decisions. In this context, "acceptance" does not mean compliance so much as an absence of organized opposition and criticism.

But the cost to the institution of this decentralized practice is considerable. There is, of course, the actual dollar cost associated with committee-based decisions, and when the value of the committee members' time is added to the indirect costs of clerical and staff support, space for meetings, and so on, even a minor decision such as amend-
changing environment. Here are my recommendations to university administrators for making that transition. The principal concept is that universities and colleges can be weaned off excessive reliance on committee decision-making if the monetary and nonmonetary costs associated with committee decisions are understood.

1. Calculating the direct and indirect costs of committee decisions. So long as the time required for group decision making and collaboration is viewed as open ended, there is no incentive to consider whether the potential outcomes of the process justify its high price tag. To illustrate this point, consider the University of Michigan’s Office of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Affairs. When the office decided in 2005 to change its name, it embarked on an elaborate consultative process that stretched on for three years and involved Web sites, surveys, bulletin boards, discussion groups, and forums. The actual total cost to the university of changing the name of this small nonacademic office probably exceeded a hundred thousand dollars. Had this cost been explicitly computed and reviewed in advance, it is likely that a more streamlined process would have emerged. Knowing the true price of governance makes it difficult to ignore whether those paying the bills—in this case, students and Michigan taxpayers—are receiving adequate value for their money.

It is a straightforward accounting exercise to compute the actual dollar cost of committee-based recommendations and decisions, along with their ancillary forums, meetings, and discussion groups. Combining the number of meeting hours (either actual or anticipated) with the prorated salaries of the members, and adding a percentage for overhead expenses, will result in a dollar value that can be used as an administrative tool to conserve committee time and ration it for important purposes. How this computation can be carried out in practice will be discussed shortly. The important point, however, is that tracking the price of all university committees should be a routine pro forma exercise for an institution’s budget office.

2. Learning to evaluate criticism. One driver of excessive dependence on committees is university administrators’ reluctance to subject themselves to criticism for making unilateral decisions that allegedly flout shared-governance principles. While this reluctance is understandable, the prospects of criticism should not inhibit leaders from making appropriate unilateral decisions. In academia, almost any administrative decision can be challenged as insufficiently collaborative by those who
oppose it; that fact alone is not a reason to avoid taking unilateral action provided, of course, that the action is grounded in reason and principle.

The strongest tool administrators have to forestall and rebut unwarranted criticism is to make every effort to explain publicly the reasons behind their decisions. It is human nature to attribute others’ unwelcome actions to impulsiveness, base motives, incompetence, or insensitivity. But if an administrator’s decision is seen as grounded in rational thinking, with a careful weighing of alternatives, then most critics will eventually accept it, even if they would have preferred a different outcome. Probably the single greatest reason for faculty opposition to their campus leaders is the failure of the administration to lay the groundwork and explain carefully the rationale for its actions. It may also be helpful for decision makers to bear in mind the positive side of criticism. When one’s actions are in clear public view, the prospect of criticism widens one’s perspective. Learning to see the consequences of a decision from many viewpoints helps put the brakes on impulsiveness.

3. Recognizing and resisting upward delegation. Upward delegation is a management problem in nearly all organizations, but universities and colleges are particularly vulnerable to this syndrome. Here is how it works. A dean, say, who is struggling to cope with an acute fiscal crisis informs the chairperson of English that he must trim $50 thousand out of his budget and asks him to submit a plan for the reduction. The plan arrives, but instead of reducing expenditures, the chairperson asks for a budget increase of $20 thousand. It is impossible, the chairperson says, to reduce his department’s expenditures. To do so would involve canceling required writing seminars for freshmen who have already signed up for the courses. The syllabus has already been approved by committees, the adjunct instructors have already been hired, and the classrooms have been reserved. To protect these and other vital programs, the dean will have to come up with more money for the English Department and cut some other department’s budget.

This is a textbook example of upward delegation in academia. In essence, the department chairperson has attempted to bump his problem up to the dean. Rather than thinking creatively about restructuring his department’s budget—cutting back on some services, offering some courses less frequently, trimming travel and operating expenses, canceling service contracts on office equipment, reducing formal course requirements for students, curtailing a visitor program, selectively increasing class sizes, etc—he has proposed a business-as-usual plan that requires no fundamental changes in the department. Of course, if the dean insists on drastic measures, he will comply, but the dean will have to come up with the plan, and the dean will be responsible for the resulting backlash from students and faculty members.2

Universities are susceptible to this phenomenon because the culture discourages decisive action by administrators and also because faculty and students are quick to audit, critique, and second-guess administrative decisions they dislike. In our example, changing teaching loads, curricular requirements, office support, and the like normally calls for lengthy discussion among department members. Committees would have to meet; alternatives would have to be explored and pros and cons debated. There is no mechanism for a department chairperson to take action on the short timeline required by a fiscal emergency. For him, the most expedient and safe course of action is to pass his problem to the dean and present himself to his colleagues and the outside world as the staunch defender of his department against the unsympathetic officials higher up in the administration.

Upward delegation comes in many disguises and is surprisingly hard to recognize. Most university administrators feel a strong sense of dedication to their institution and can switch into a problem-solving mode almost out of instinct. The key to resisting upward delegation is to keep in mind the appropriateness of the problem. Asking oneself habitually whether a presented problem really is an issue that a president (or provost or vice president or dean) should be handling is the best way to recognize the syndrome. If the answer is no, then it is important not to engage, no matter how interesting or important the problem may appear to be in the abstract. It is also helpful to remind upward delegators that that making unpopular but necessary decisions is part of their job, responsibility and one of the performance criteria against which they are evaluated.

4. Understanding when unilateral action is appropriate. Administrators should not shy away from making unilateral decisions that are straightforward, benign, and easily justified, or for which there is a precedent. This may seem an obvious point, but it is surprising how frequently academic committees are appointed to belabor the obvious or to confirm what is already widely anticipated. Thus, asking a committee to review an obviously dysfunctional program or office, to recommend a minor policy change (such as amending a provision of a student handbook), or to debate an issue on which extensive debate has already taken place is to waste
institutional resources. Administrators should think carefully about their true motivation for appointing committees. If the advice of a committee is not really needed, then it should not be created merely to send a symbolic message about collaboration. Carried to extremes, this common practice is not only wasteful and inefficient but also manipulative. One disrespects the true value of shared governance by going through the motions of consulting one’s colleagues when their advice and counsel is not the real point of the exercise. Appointing a committee when the major reason for doing so is merely to diffuse the responsibility for making an obvious decision wastes time and is the signature of a weak leader.

Another appropriate moment for making unilateral decisions is when it is unlikely that a group consensus on a course of action can be obtained. I learned this lesson a few years ago when gender-equity issues created unsustainable budget problems for my university’s intercollegiate athletics program. Because of the sensitivity of the issue to students, alumni, and sports fans, I asked the university senate for recommendations about the advisability of eliminating several varsity men’s teams. The senators debated the pros and cons of the issue for months but could not come to closure. In the end, they directed the decision back to me without a recommendation, and I proposed to my board the phase-out of three men’s varsity teams. Hindsight suggests that I should have realized that community debate on contentious topics can stretch on endlessly without resolution.

On important or controversial issues, such as eliminating varsity sports, it is clearly necessary to encourage public comment and, especially, to give those who would be most affected by an impending change an opportunity to voice their opposition and make proposals for alternate courses of action. However, the process and structure for this dialogue should be carefully spelled out in advance, with the understanding that on a certain date an administrative decision will be made.

5. Understanding when to appoint committees. The most important reasons for appointing a committee are these: (a) the topic requires the collected knowledge and experience of a group; (b) the workload to research an issue is too great for one or two people; and (c) a topic needs to be evaluated from different perspectives before a decision can be made. There is thus a strong rationale for appointing search committees (provided the members are selected because of their knowledge of the position), curriculum committees, ad hoc committees on complex issues (such as student alcohol abuse), and committees pertaining to racial and ethnic diversity, intercollegiate athletics, investment policy, accreditation, and campus life. Committees are necessary for reviewing faculty credentials for promotion and tenure. The point is that, whatever the topic, the guiding principle should be a necessity for group judgment.

That said, administrators should also be on the lookout for alternate ways of obtaining necessary group advice. Instead of convening a committee to plan next year’s weekly colloquium schedule, it is far faster and more economical for the department chairperson to solicit suggestions informally and then draw up a list of potential speakers. And it nearly goes without saying that when committees are unavoidable, they should be kept as small as possible, the timetable for recommendations specified in advance, and recommendations and final reports stipulated to be as brief as possible.

But despite all of the above, there will still be times when administrators feel compelled to create committees simply because the academic community expects formal involvement and will be incensed if this wish is not honored. Highly controversial topics, matters that have a significant impact on campus life, and the appointment of senior academic administrators almost always carry expectations of broad community involvement. It would be an error of judgment, however, to satisfy this community expectation by appointing committee members primarily to represent diverse campus constituencies, rather than for their expertise and knowledge. As discussed previously, democratically balanced committees whose members bring no special insight or knowledge to the task at hand can not only slow an institution’s forward motion but do it lasting harm.
In these situations, a better strategy is to convene a small working committee of knowledgeable members and then to explain to the larger community that the committee has been asked to consult broadly across campus. Thus, instead of appointing an inexperienced undergraduate student to a committee charged with recruiting a school’s chief financial officer, appoint somebody with actual knowledge and experience in financial matters who will then consult with student groups to solicit their views. If the cost savings and other practical benefits of this approach are explained to the community, then widespread grumbling about “not being consulted” will be defused. The stakes are too high for unqualified people, however well intentioned, to influence important university decisions about leadership and institutional direction.

Strategies for Reducing Service Bloat

In higher education, professors are evaluated by their department chairpersons each year for their professional contributions to teaching, research, and service, with the relative importance of these categories varying according to institutional mission. Most universities and colleges, public and private, expect a balance of strengths in each of these three areas. At universities and colleges that have a significant research mission, research excellence is valued more highly than teaching and service. Although university presidents, provosts, and deans often emphasize the importance of teaching in their public statements, the reality is that the dollars flow toward the school’s top researchers. Outstanding scholars are rare birds that bring national prominence to an institution. Good teachers may reap the highest praise from students and alumni, but good teachers are more common than good researchers and they do not command a large “market value” outside of their campuses.

But if faculty research excellence is generally valued more than instructional excellence, at least in monetary terms, service achievements fall well below either activity. For faculty members, on-campus service generally means serving on departmental or university committees. Normally, professors receive their regular committee assignments at the beginning of each academic year, and these assignments may be supplemented throughout the year with ad hoc appointments to search committees, task forces, or commissions. Other on-campus service activities may include helping to organize workshops and conferences, hosting visitors, serving on university or faculty senates, and advising student groups and Greek organizations.

Most of these activities serve a useful and in some cases vital purpose in keeping the gears of the university turning smoothly. However, as we have seen, service can be carried to excess, resulting in committees that are larger than necessary, that meander without focus, that are preoccupied with minor matters, that delay or skirt important decisions, and that contribute unnecessarily to higher costs and inefficient use of institutional resources. Eliminating this unneeded and unproductive service “bloat” is thus a necessary step in shaping universities to accommodate a twenty-first-century reality of diminished public support and intense competition.

In truth, many professors view their committee responsibilities as a distraction from their primary teaching and research activities. Of course, there are other faculty members who enjoy serving on committees, who like the social interaction, and who have an organizational flair and the interpersonal skills needed to work productively with groups of people. University leaders are good at recognizing such persons and often encourage them to make a transition out of the classroom and into the ranks of the school’s administration. But more typically, faculty members see their service obligations mostly as a required and sometimes thankless chore. Thus, if colleges and universities can increase their productivity, reduce their costs, and speed up their responsiveness by scaling back on excess service activities, they will find their faculty mostly agreeable to this idea. The challenge is to create the incentives that will induce professors to restructure their time more productively, without sacrificing either their autonomy or their influence over their school’s direction. My proposal for creating these incentives entails the following five steps:

1. **On-campus service expectations.** The first step is to remove on-campus service as a formal criterion for promotion and tenure of probationary professors and as a component of merit salary raises for tenured senior faculty. In essence, this change would recognize formally what often is acknowledged in practice—that routine, day-to-day service is one of the continuing obligations of the academic profession but does not warrant special recognition or reward. Being helpful, whether by serving on committees, mentoring junior colleagues, or offering advice to a dean or provost, is part of the civic duties one pays to be a professor. Although