SHARED GOVERNANCE

The standard in academic governance

By Rebekah Burch Basinger

Shared governance is a long-time feature of American higher education, yet it remains a frequently misunderstood and often maligned aspect of academic life. Board members, administrators, and faculty have all, at one time or another, voiced doubts about the concept. In many places — including some theological schools — shared governance functions as an uneasy truce among competing factions. Systems of shared governance are frequently inefficient, inflexible, and time-consuming, and it doesn't take much for campus tensions to escalate into full-blown conflict.

After all, sharing doesn't come easy, and all the more so when power is in play. However, within theological schools, the commitment to shared governance is about so much more than defending prerogatives. It's a means to advance the mission of the school and, by extension, to advance God's purposes for the church.

The shared governance mandate

For more than forty years, discussions of shared governance have been shaped by the 1966 "Statement on Government of Colleges and Universities," a collaborative project of the American Association of University Professors, the American Council on Education, and the Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges. The statement represented a good-faith effort to mend the breaches that had developed among boards, administrations, and faculty. In retrospect, its call for "mutual understanding … based on community of interest and producing joint effort" seems almost audacious considering the turmoil on college and university campuses in the mid-1960s. The document includes the prediction that "a college or university in which all the components are aware of the interdependence, of the usefulness of communication among themselves, and of the force of joint action will enjoy increased capacity to solve educational problems."

The Standard on Authority and Governance adopted by the Association of Theological Schools in the United States and Canada (ATS) builds on the 1966 statement by addressing in detail the roles of the governing board, administration, faculty, and students in the governance process. Theological school leaders are directed toward a model of governance that incorporates collaborative goal-setting, and a problem-solving process built on trust and communication. An appreciation that persons other than board members and the president can make good decisions on behalf of the institution is evident throughout the ATS document. However, as generations of board members, presidents, and faculty leaders have discovered, putting that appreciation into practice is easier said than done.

A longer version of this article, titled "More than Simply Getting Along: The Goal of Shared Governance in Theological Schools" appeared in 2009 in **Theological Education** *(Volume 44, No. 2), available for purchase from the Association of Theological Schools at* www.ats.edu. *This condensed version is printed with the permission of the Association of Theological Schools in the United States and Canada.*

Distributing governing power to create legitimacy

There is no single, agreed-upon, one-size-fits-all model for pursuing shared governance. The ways by which the responsibilities are assigned to the various participants in governance, or even identifying who those participants are, are unique to each institution. As a result, that which is labeled as "shared governance" at one school will likely be different from the theological school down the road, and sometimes starkly so. But in its simplest form, shared governance is *collegial decision-making or the process of distributing authority, power, and influence among campus constituencies*.

Longtime seminary president Robert E. Cooley asserts that shared governance is best understood as uniting legitimacy and competency. In an e-mail message to me, he wrote:

> *The board, as volunteers and "worldly-wise," bring legitimacy to actions and decisions. They are laypersons and part time.*
>
> *The faculty, as [a body of] full-time professionals, brings competency and educational qualities necessary to fulfilling the education mission. Competency alone cannot get the job done; it needs to be legitimized and held accountable in the interest of students, donors, and other stakeholders.*
>
> *The key to shared governance is presidential leadership. Without the dominant leadership of a president to guide, harmonize, and manage, shared governance will not happen.*

Shared governance, argues Cooley, brings meaning to the decision-making requirements of an institution.

Myths about shared governance

Many an attempt at forging a culture of shared governance has been derailed by misconceptions firmly embedded in the collective consciousness of governance stakeholders. These "old academics' tales" contain just enough truth to make them believable: Almost all longtime residents of the ivory tower can tell a sorry story or two about meddling boards, self-serving presidents, or faculties in revolt.

Myth 1: Shared governance is an abdication of the board's responsibilities. To be sure, increased scrutiny by governmental agencies, including application of aspects of the Sarbanes-Oxley Act to non-profit organizations, has heightened awareness of the oversight responsibilities of boards. However, as Daniel O. Aleshire warns in his book *Earthen Vessels*, "If all the board does is its fiduciary work, it fails the school in other ways" (page 103). If board members employ strategic indicators and dashboard data for tracking basic fiduciary information, some board time can be freed up for strategic and generative work.

Myth 2: Shared governance is too unwieldy to be practical in the modern theological school. As boards and presidents grapple with the threat of financial insolvency, there may not be as much sharing of governance as some of the participants might prefer. To continue to reflect the collegial nature of theological education though, governance leaders should find ways to fast-track decision-making without seeming to run rough-shod over some segments of the community.

Myth 3: Everyone must be involved in every decision and in precisely the same way. Shared responsibility does not mean that all stakeholders have an equal voice in all areas of operations. Rather, the weight of each voice is directly proportional to the responsibility that voice has with respect to the issue in question. In many situations, "distributed" might be a more helpful modifier than "shared." Specifically, responsibility within academic governance is distributed as follows:

Legislative. The board has primary responsibility, shared with the president, and the faculty has input.

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Institutional. The administration has primary responsibility, as delegated by the board, and employees have input.

Educational. The faculty has primary responsibility, with administrative and board oversight.

Creating clarity in shared governance

For the majority of seminary communities, shared governance is simply the way things are done. Governance systems often run on assumptions more than *clearly defined expectations*.

However, when a theological school's culture is infused with a clear and comprehensive understanding of the shared responsibility for governance, the inevitable bumps in the governance pathway are softened.

This begins by pursuing the following steps:

Step 1: Identify the key governance stakeholders for the particular theological school. This is easiest within the context of independent seminaries, in which governance responsibilities are shared by the usual players — board, administration, and faculty. In the case of schools related to colleges, universities, or clusters of other theological schools, naming the governance partners can be more of a challenge. And, at some theological schools, board and campus personnel share authority for institutional planning and decision-making with an ecclesial body like a denomination or religious order.

Step 2: Identify the key governance decisions facing the school. Look as carefully and completely as possible at the plans, challenges, and opportunities facing the school during a specific period of time. Institutional situations shift from one year to the next, and so too the governance issues that must be addressed. Board members, though in touch with issues that are top of the mind for external constituents, are usually limited in their ability to identify internal issues in need of attention. On the other hand, administrators and faculty, with their noses pressed to the institutional grindstone, can be late in detecting governance challenges that are coming at the school from beyond the campus. It takes collaboration among the governance partners to develop a full list of the key governance decisions waiting in the wings.

Step 3: Identify the roles of the various governance stakeholders in each of the key decisions. All governance decisions are not the same, just as

Comparing models of governance

Shared governance is neither promoted nor precluded in either of the two governance models that dominate the wider nonprofit world.

It is valuable to be aware of these models — **policy governance** *and* **governance as leadership** *— and to test the benefits and challenges that each brings to the governance table. The majority of theological schools function with a hybrid model of governance, developed over time and with ideas selected piecemeal from a rapidly expanding smorgasbord of organizational literature and governance theory.*

Policy governance

According to John Carver, his *policy governance* model promises "a coherent framework of concepts and principles that is internally consistent as well as powerful in dealing with whatever practical situations arise" (Carver Guide 1, page 1). Carver's distinction between board-established organizational ends and management-generated means of implementation has helped many theological schools and other organizations clarify the respective roles of the board and the chief executive.

Policy governance locates the work of the board in the realm of ends, and hands the means of getting there over to the president and his or her leadership team. Boards are expected to define the boundaries within which the president should work, and then to trust him or her to "just do it." This model's advocates say that as policy governance boards focus on the vision, mission, values, and strategic priorities of the school, they are freed from the disproportionate attention to trivia that so frequently clogs an institution's governance arteries.

Although policy governance has become a familiar and comfortable framework for many organizational leaders, the model is not without potential problems:

- Board and staff relations may be vulnerable and disconnected because of the emphasis on separate and distinct roles. This can impede a school's commitment to shared governance.
- Links between policies, operations, and outcomes are often tenuous.

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the primary function of the stakeholders are not identical. Ambiguity about jurisdictions of authority invariably leads to conflict. This is a particular challenge in smaller schools where the lines between institutional and educational decisions are often blurred and where individuals fill multiple roles. Taking time to clarify roles and responsibilities does not preclude gray or overlapping areas of authority. Doing so does, however, alert institutional leaders to potential trouble spots.

Step 4: Assess the adequacy of existing governance structures to handle the work ahead. This step should help in identifying governance functions that have outlived their usefulness and suggest possible new venues (such as councils, committees, teams, or task forces) that are more likely to facilitate a healthy culture of shared decision-making. As specific governance tasks are assigned to the various governance bodies, these should be delineated in handbooks and policy guidelines. It is particularly important to make clear the relationship between the work of campus and board committees that focus on similar issues (for example, the finance committee of the board and a campus-based budget committee).

Following these four steps can facilitate trust and allow more permeable boundaries between faculty and administration and also between the campus community and the board. The steps establish an expectation of accountability among and between the governance partners for the proper execution of their roles.

In the end, though, trustees, administrators, and faculty all must believe that institutional governance is worth their best efforts. And if today's leaders in academic governance will pursue this purpose with their whole hearts, there is the possibility that those who come after them will see in shared governance an opportunity for fostering trust, respect, and goodwill in their seminary community. And so, they could experience shared governance as a spiritual discipline, as well as an organizational responsibility. IT

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- Power is concentrated in the hands of a few.

For a further description of these and other problems, see *www.innovation.cc/peer-reviewed/bradshaw5final.pdf*.

Governance as leadership

Unlike policy governance, which lays the blame for faulty governance at the feet of practice, *governance as leadership* identifies purpose (or its lack) as the culprit. The book *Governance as Leadership*, by Richard Chait, William Ryan, and Barbara Taylor, is the handbook of this model. They write: "Boards may know what to do, and do it reasonably well, but in the end they are derailed by the meaninglessness of what they do" (page 23). By expanding boardroom conversations to topics other than the usual fiduciary issues, governance as leadership addresses the problems of bored boards and board member disengagement, and infuses the board's work with a robust sense of purpose. The way is opened for board members to engage with administrators other than the president and also with faculty members around strategic and generative issues.

However, before leaping head first into this model of governance, it is important for board leaders to be aware of potential challenges that will need to be addressed or at least considered. These include:

- **Time.** Not enough time to fully engage all governance partners in generative thinking and planning. The majority of seminary boards meet infrequently (two or three times a year) and agendas are already jam-packed with fiduciary details.
- **Fear.** Fear by the president of losing control of the governance process. Some presidents prefer approval from rather than dialogue with the board and/or campus constituents.
- **Risk.** Lack of creativity and bravery among participants in the governance process. There is considerably more risk involved in governance as leadership than in more prescribed models of governance.

"Intentionality" is the watchword of all exemplary boards, regardless the model of governance they perceive themselves to be pursuing.

— Rebekah Burch Basinger