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# Faculty Leadership and Institutional Resilience: Indicators, Promising Practices, and Key Questions

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# Faculty Leadership and Institutional Resilience

## Indicators, Promising Practices, and Key Questions

by Brian Norman

**Shared governance has become a critical focus** for senior leaders concerned with institutional resilience and effectiveness. A blue-ribbon commission of the Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges (AGB, 2014) called on boards to take seriously this area of responsibility. At the same time, shared governance is a notoriously contested and misunderstood area for faculty and senior administrators in the modern university (e.g., AGB 2018; Bahls, 2014a; Bowen & Tobin, 2015; Gerber, 2014; Ginsburg, 2011; Scott, 2018). Even its definition and boundaries are often up for debate.

In his study of best practices in shared governance, Steven Bahls (2014b) advocates a vision of “integral leadership” involving board members, faculty, and administrators intentionally building partnerships, collaboration, and trust. Similarly, Adrianna Kezar (2004) found that cultural matters of trust and relationship supersede structural matters in importance because they can allow a campus to function even when the structure is imperfect. She concluded, “Campuses can build effective governance through an investment in leadership development and through mechanisms that nurture faculty, staff, and administrative relationships” (p.45).

How might institutions do that and why? In cooperation with the Collaborative on Academic Careers in Higher Education (COACHE), the Harvard Graduate School of Education’s research-practice partnership, I examined data

about the on-the-ground successes in faculty leadership development. The findings should help boards, presidents, provosts, deans, and senior faculty better understand why and how to develop faculty leaders to support institutional quality and sustainability. Further, I suggest that the best institutions will take an expansive view of faculty leadership, including not only building a bench of future administrators, but also intellectual leaders,

### IN SHORT

- The COACHE national survey can identify exemplary institutions where faculty themselves report the greatest satisfaction in faculty leadership.
- There is no one-size-fits-all approach but rather common indicators to gauge the health of academic governance on a given campus.
- Leaders at exemplary institutions tend to speak of institutional commitment and campus community, and deliberately create collegial and open opportunities for all faculty to participate in academic governance, including newer faculty and former faculty leaders.
- Faculty, senior leaders, and boards should expand what we mean by faculty leadership to better encompass the various ways faculty meaningfully influence the direction and health of an institution.

directors of centers, heads of large labs, stewards of key curricular initiatives, and so on. Such an approach weds professional values of ongoing growth and achievement with institutional desires for quality, efficiency, and longevity - namely, resilience.

### LOCATING SUCCESS

For this exploratory study, I turned to COACHE’s national faculty satisfaction survey to identify institutions of various types (baccalaureate, master’s,

research) where faculty report the highest levels of satisfaction in areas related to faculty leadership. Based on data from 2014-2017, those institutions included: Brown University, Iowa State University, Kenyon College, Middlebury College, Stockton University, University of North Carolina (UNC) at Chapel Hill, and Western Carolina University. I then interviewed the chief academic or faculty affairs officers and chief elected faculty members to better understand what their institutions might be doing well. (See note on methodology, p. 11)

What makes for a healthy culture of faculty leadership? There is no perfect governance structure or one-size-fits-all leadership development program. I did not find a secret sauce or a hack list of “3 Things Every Chief Academic Officer Should Do Right Now to Fix Faculty Governance.” Among the professoriate, satisfaction with faculty leadership and academic governance cuts across institution type: public or private, small or large, research- or teaching-oriented, unionized or not. Some institutions, especially the larger ones, have well-established programs designed to cultivate faculty leadership, such as institutes, cohorts, trainings, and mentoring initiatives, while others describe a softer approach in creating cultures of participation.

There also was no pattern for whether faculty have representation on boards of trustees, although, when asked, faculty leaders tended to testify to the importance of interaction between faculty and board members. This could involve anything from a formal seat or simply a recurring invitation to particular committee meetings or social gatherings. In turn, those same faculty leaders often talked about the value of an administrative perspective in the room for faculty matters, whether through formal ex officio roles or by invitation or custom. This is contrary to the distrust of administrators exhibited by what Bahls (2014a) described as the advocacy styles of some faculty senates, especially in a model of shared governance as equal rights.

What I did discover at these exemplary institutions is that attitudes about and commitments to the ideas of faculty leadership and shared governance tend to manifest themselves in explicit programs

that make leadership development an intentional part of the faculty experience at these institutions. All of the exemplars profiled for this study create open pathways and numerous opportunities for faculty to participate meaningfully in the civic life of their institutions. In turn, their senior leaders take faculty roles in institutional governance seriously and—beyond the platitudes—take action, not cover, when the community feels that governance is falling short.

This study provides a small sample of institutions at which the lived experiences among both faculty and administration suggest something about faculty leadership and governance is working well. Further studies (e.g., of COACHE partners who have improved on these measures over time) can test with greater precision how that came to be. At this point I am cautious about offering grand generalizations. Instead, I offer some apparent indicators of success and follow-up questions that senior leaders and faculty themselves should be asking to improve the vitality of faculty leadership on their campuses.

### INDICATORS OF HEALTH

#### INDICATOR 1: YOUR “BEST” FACULTY ARE SEEKING OUT GOVERNANCE POSITIONS

Perhaps the most salient indicator of the health of shared governance is whether an institution’s best faculty—in the many ways a local culture defines “best”—decide that governance is worth their time. A number of interviewees made a point of observing an increased interest in participation on their campuses, especially among whom they perceive as successful faculty. Examples include an up-tick in competition for limited seats in Iowa State’s emerging leaders academy and high-profile candidates for key elected roles at UNC.

Presumably, excellent faculty have many things they could be doing—writing grants, publishing books, giving lectures, developing courses, pursuing patents, attracting graduate students—so the decision to run for election or seek other leadership opportunities may be a vote of confidence in

governance itself. John Maluccio, chair of the Faculty Council at Middlebury, suggested, “How do we change the norm so that serving is something colleagues *want* to do?” Similarly, Melinda Rabb, chair of the Faculty Executive Committee at Brown University, offered a rather straightforward answer: when faculty see their past recommendations become reality, they are more inclined to take governance positions seriously in the future.

The desire for the “best” faculty to participate in academic governance was embraced just as often by administrative leaders, who saw direct links to institutional quality and their ability to move a campus forward. In *How to Run a College*, Mitchell and King (2018) argued, “As a whole, the faculty must put its best candidates forward in governance” (p. 16). They contrast this with the “drowsy” state of weak governance structures in which faculty end up in leadership positions by default, and colleagues do not place a high value on that work.

In my conversations with elected faculty leaders, several spoke of their personal efforts to elevate the status of such positions to attract the best to be their successors, whether through word of mouth, more intensive peer recruiting, or concerted efforts to demonstrate the direct impact of faculty governing bodies. Academic leaders may be in even better positions to demonstrate that they take faculty leadership seriously: showing up for governance meetings; making a point of drawing direct lines between faculty recommendations and institutional actions; and talking up the importance of leadership positions to the most promising faculty.

#### **FOLLOW UP QUESTION: WHAT COUNTS AS LEADERSHIP?**

As senior leaders and faculty gauge who is seeking out key campus roles, a follow-up question should be what counts as faculty leadership. This is a variation of the perennial question of how service counts in individual evaluations. More important, it is about how the work of stewarding the institution is valued by a given campus community.

When I asked campus leaders about the working definition of “faculty leadership,” many mentioned

formal titles—chair, dean, provost, senate president. But when I asked about underlying functions rather than formal roles—assisting in program development, organizing a lecture series, serving as a diversity advocate on search committees, or improving campus policies—the vision of who “counts” as a leader quickly expanded. For example, Donnetrice Allison, president of the Faculty Senate at Stockton University, concluded, “It all counts as ways to participate in leadership.” These conversations often led to questions about pipelines into more formal leadership roles. To that end, for example, Middlebury explicitly includes key faculty committee service as a qualification in calls for important administrative positions.

#### **INDICATOR 2: FACULTY TAKE PUBLIC STANDS WITH ONE ANOTHER**

At several institutions, faculty and administrative leaders pointed to the importance of thoughtful disagreement among faculty as an important indicator that governance is working well. Chair of



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Faculty at Kenyon Marcella Hackbardt stated, “We have discussions in committee, and we don’t always agree. Disagreement about issues is a way of solving them, as long as it’s respectful.” The presence of civil debate among faculty suggests trust in governance formats as well as a sense of shared stewardship over the institution beyond individual unit interests.

That said, leaders at public institutions cautioned that open meetings in times of public controversy—such as academic scandal or political debate—prompted faculty to be measured with their words, knowing they were on display for the media or public. In such times, more honest preparatory conversations might happen outside formal venues themselves. Still, even in those circumstances, intra-colleague disagreement was seen as a positive indicator that colleagues were thinking about institutional well-being.

### **FOLLOW UP QUESTION: HOW DO WE CREATE SPACES FOR INFORMAL, LOW-STAKES DIALOGUE?**

If thoughtful disagreement among faculty is an indicator of health, campus leaders can nurture that culture by asking, “Where do faculty go to pursue collegial disagreement about complex questions?” And, “Are those spaces open to faculty who may perceive themselves as vulnerable—early-stage scholars, those on non-tenure-track appointments, members of under-represented groups?”

The ideal of faculty deliberation and thoughtful disagreement that arose in my conversations contrasts notably with an advocacy style that Bahls (2014a) identifies in many academic governance systems. In an advocacy mode, faculty may view the senate as a place to bring a unified faculty voice to administrators. This can easily slip into an adversarial mode where the main power of faculty voice is “no.” The result is often an imposed consensus, which brings the possibility of a chilling effect due to incivility or even bullying among faculty (American Association of University Professors, 2015, p. 125).

On the contrary, in my interviews faculty leaders often spoke of their efforts to bring in

multiple voices, including especially their early-career colleagues. I did not hear the common claim of protecting faculty from important committees but rather concerted efforts to cultivate future leaders among their new colleagues by inviting them to consider key and difficult questions the institution was facing. Further, several administrative leaders spoke positively of moments when noted skeptics on the faculty found themselves speaking on behalf of the institution. The administrators attributed such public stands to individual histories of participating in governance bodies and coming to understand the complexity of the institution.

How can leaders foster thoughtful disagreement as an institutional norm? Iowa State offers one promising model by explicitly bringing potentially controversial topics into regular monthly workshops for department leaders, such as freedom of speech or retaining faculty of color. Further, they intentionally bring together leaders from different roles and areas of campus, such as through a leadership academy open to both staff and faculty members. The result, according to Associate Provost Dawn Bratsch-Prince, is a sense of shared purpose that can be especially difficult to achieve at large institutions.

### **INDICATOR 3: THERE ARE CONTESTED ELECTIONS FOR KEY ROLES**

Many of the leaders with whom I spoke remarked positively about a recent phenomenon of contested elections. They were often quick to point out that this sign of increased engagement was not necessarily a response to a problem or perceived failure that needed to be fixed. For example, Kenyon’s Hackbardt attributed competitive elections in part to a recent record of faculty governance getting things done, such as an otherwise controversial 10-year faculty review plan that arose from a “pro-faculty agenda.” Further, she and others are finding that newer and earlier-stage faculty are particularly open to seeing governance roles as meaningful. When asked whether this is truly an institutional shift or simply a generational difference, she suggested only time will tell.

Leaders can influence the answer to this question by intentionally fostering institutional stewardship as part of faculty development efforts. They can make governance an explicit component of new faculty orientation, leadership academies, or recurring faculty development workshops from a center for faculty excellence or other body. UNC, for example, offers a leadership development program geared not just as a pipeline into administration, but as a more general, formative opportunity for faculty as they become more invested in the institution.

#### FOLLOW UP QUESTION: WHO GETS TO BE A LEADER?

As institutions seek to value faculty leadership, they must ask questions about who comes into leadership positions and how. Across the board, leaders expressed the critical importance of open, frequent, and transparent opportunities to participate in the life of the institution, including decision making. That is, exemplary institutions are thinking carefully about cultivating leaders *before* they are in any formal role, which contrasts with the norm of on-the-job training following an indifferent (or worse) election.

Some institutions, especially larger ones, have formal leadership academies and institutes open to both faculty and administration (e.g., UNC, Iowa State, Western Carolina). They are systematic about diversifying the range of faculty who participate and thereby the bench of talent. Further, an inclusive vision of who belongs at the table need not be focused solely on early-career faculty or members of minority groups. For instance, in response to faculty feedback, UNC includes retired faculty on its elected Faculty Council.

Smaller institutions in this study tend to take a less structured approach to pathways into leadership, perhaps reflecting realities of scale. There is a risk that the absence of formal structures can lead to an “old boys club” culture. In that context, it is telling that each of the interviewees articulated aims of inclusion and becoming more conscious of informal pathways. Middlebury, for example, has moved to

open calls for term-limited positions, Kenyon has a model of rotating associate provosts, and Stockton has a Faculty Fellow program. One promising practice recently debuted at Kenyon: governance receptions in advance of nominations for elected positions, which Hackbart reports are well attended by early-stage faculty.



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#### INDICATOR 4: FACULTY SHOW UP IN TIMES OF STRESS OR CRISIS

In many of my conversations, administrators and faculty spoke favorably of their colleagues’ responses to challenges that existing governance structures did not anticipate or for which they were ill-equipped, such as a budget crisis or fallout from an unpopular institutional decision. In those instances, campus leaders spoke of the importance of turning to governance structures as places for problems to be addressed and debated, rather than answers communicated or fires doused. Stockton University provost and vice president for academic affairs Lori Vermeulen favorably described an “all hands on deck” culture in the aftermath of an attempted campus expansion, for instance. She described



shared governance as a place to gather smart people in a room to find the best way forward and as a place to answer skeptics. In such times, Kenyon College provost Joe Klesner generally finds that college identity supersedes faculty identity, and there is generally “no inclination to defect from collective process.” Similarly, for Western Carolina University’s associate provost Brandon Schwab, trust in shared governance requires a form of leadership that involves transparency and communication but also vulnerability. “I see a lot of leaders not willing to show a weakness or admit a failure,” he said. “It takes a strong person to say: ‘Look, I screwed up. ... I need your help.’”

### **FOLLOW UP QUESTION: IS GOVERNANCE WORKING?**

If responses to times of crisis are indicative, campus leaders must continually work to make sure healthy governance will be available when it is needed most. Enlightened leaders ask whether governance is working on their campuses; courageous leaders ask whether their own leadership is working.

Many CAOs explicitly described the COACHE survey as a means to affirm that faculty “feel heard” or to identify where and how leadership might fall short of the ideal. Several leaders attributed the high satisfaction of their faculty to explicit overhauls of shared governance following a moment when governance was perceived to not be working, whether prompted by a particular institutional crisis or by a general malaise.

At least three interviewees described a formal governance review a mid administrative leadership transitions. They described deliberate attempts to rectify governance norms and structures and an opportunity to mend frayed relationships with faculty. Whether or not a breakdown is necessary to prompt reaffirmation of governance, most leaders in this study agreed on the healthy end-state: communication, transparency, and trust. All of these need time and a few high-profile examples to demonstrate that administration is serious in consulting faculty—not just to “feel heard,” but because faculty voice makes the institution better.

This affirms the recommendation by Bahls (2014b) that institutions develop a process of periodic governance review so that it becomes an institutional habit rather than response. And if faculty perceive that paying attention to governance is worth their time, it is more likely that the right people will show up in times of crisis—precisely when you need them most.

### **INDICATOR 5: FACULTY EXPERIENCE REASONABLE ACCESS TO LEADERS**

A lot of my conversations started with positive descriptions of a relatively flat organizational culture, irrespective of particular governance structures or reporting hierarchies. Stockton’s Vermeulen, for example, directly connected a faculty sense of “feeling heard” to their experience of access to senior leaders, including the president. As a result, she noted, her open office hours are popular. Stockton’s faculty leader, Donnetrice Allison, also praised the non-hierarchical nature of campus culture, although both she and Vermeulen noted that a trade-off can be that faculty roles are more relational than powerful. For instance, Stockton has program coordinators, rather than department chairs, who have no special role in tenure and promotion processes. Still, in the words of deputy provost for Academic Affairs at Brown University, Beth Doherty, “Flat systems facilitate good relationships.”

### **FOLLOW UP QUESTION: ARE WE DEVELOPING LIFELONG LEADERSHIP?**

If access to those with decision-making power is important for institutional resilience, a relational approach to faculty leadership development may be wise. That is, how might a campus foster lifelong leadership as an institutional culture beyond formal structures? When asked about what successful governance looks like, many leaders drew a picture of faculty and administration learning together, whether on consequential task forces (e.g., Stockton), in the participation of the provost at senate meetings (e.g., UNC), or in difficult topical discussions at monthly workshops for department chairs (e.g., Iowa State). One university (Western



Carolina) culminates its annual leadership academy for faculty and administrators with a regional bus tour joined by incoming senior leadership.

All this points to framing leadership beyond specific roles and toward an institutional relationship. They payoff: even as faculty cycle off formal leadership roles with visibility and responsibility, they continue to find themselves in other rooms where big questions arise. At such moments, they can act as important thinkers, translators, and ambassadors. In fact, both the chief academic officers and the faculty chairs at the two liberal arts colleges in this study specifically pointed to the importance of former administrators who returned to their full-time faculty positions. As Kenyon's Klesner explained, "They've all sat around the table. They have an appreciation for the decision-making process."

## EXPANDING WHAT WE MEAN BY FACULTY LEADERSHIP

In "Growing Our Own" (2018), COACHE Executive Director Kiernan Mathews describes his work both with deans, presidents, and provosts and a new breed of faculty affairs officers in developing a model of leadership most needed in the modern university. "One lesson I have taken from these exercises," he suggests, "is that higher education must embrace and strengthen our capacity for diversified, distributed, and developmental leadership. To change the academy for the better, we must commit completely to the lifelong development of our faculties—not just into better faculty, but into faculty leaders" (p. 91). That vision requires a capacious definition of what faculty leadership is and who should take it on.

Faculty leadership can encompass so much more than the management of an individual institution to include intellectual leadership in every aspect of teaching, learning, research, and civic engagement—the "farm team." Yet *leadership* and *administration* are not synonymous in higher education. In my conversations with chief elected faculty leaders, it was sometimes a revelation—a pleasant one—

that the category *faculty leadership* might include them. That leadership went beyond department chairs or those other "former" colleagues who had "moved into" administration.

Still, these elected roles are only one additional aspect of faculty leadership. At Brown, for instance, participation in formal governance is not necessarily high, but, Doherty notes, "It is important to take a broad view of governance. Governance happens in multiple ways and at multiple levels. The [formal governance body] is just one locus, and it doesn't necessarily overwhelm all of governance." Similarly, in his best practices study, Bahls (2014a) advocates including faculty members in leadership development programs that might otherwise be reserved for administrators. These could be existing on-campus and consortium-based efforts, or national programs and institutes (p. 84). He also emphasizes not allowing community members to circumvent faculty leadership structures, but instead to encourage them to consult faculty leaders first and to reward participation in shared governance (pp. 85-86).

My study suggests that by broadening our focus to the full spectrum of faculty leadership, we are even better able to appreciate and foster the many vectors of institutional quality. In the words of Ronald Strauss, executive vice provost at UNC, "Robust faculty engagement is critical to university quality. Faculty that feel empowered are more likely to stay, more likely to remain successful in their work and to feel included, and that leads to a better institution." For Jeff Cason, provost at Middlebury College, the goal is simple: "Faculty assuming responsibility for the future of the institution." In the end, we may very well find that investing attention and resources in developing faculty leadership broadly conceived can make our institutions run better in terms of institutional resources and sustainability, intellectual climate, and academic reputation.

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## A Note on Methods of Identifying Leading Institutions from the COACHE Faculty Job Satisfaction Survey

The Collaborative on Academic Careers in Higher Education (COACHE) administers a Faculty Job Satisfaction Survey, which equips academic leaders at participating institutions who agree to work with COACHE to better understand the faculty experience and make changes to improve the conditions for faculty success and institutional excellence. Over the years, the findings have yielded a number of insights into best practices across different areas of faculty and institutional life.

In 2014, COACHE sought to expand its survey to more thoroughly address the topic of shared governance. The resulting governance modules use existing questions around leadership at various levels (department, division, faculty, senior) as well as new questions around the behaviors of senior administrators and faculty leaders concerning governance adaptability, productivity, shared sense of purpose, trust, and understanding the issues at hand. At the inception of Dr. Norman's study published here, the data set for the governance module included responses from over 66,000 faculty members at 138 participating four- and two-year institutions, with an average response rate of 53%.

To support Dr. Norman's study, COACHE researchers used a mixed methods approach to identify and understand institutions where faculty themselves report relatively high satisfaction and frequent observation of model behaviors in the area of faculty leadership. First, we sought to identify leading institutions in the COACHE data set through a quantitative analysis of the survey data around an analysis of aggregate variables of leadership and governance, as well as a specific question on faculty leadership development:

### ITEM:

*"My institution cultivates new leaders among faculty."*

### RESPONSE OPTIONS:

*"Frequently; Regularly; Occasionally; Seldom; Never; I don't know; Decline to answer"*

COACHE researchers looked for institutions of various types (baccalaureate, masters, research) where faculty report higher than expected levels of frequency when controlling for institution type and size. We then conducted additional checks of faculty demographics at the highest-scoring institutions to ensure that they were broadly representative of their peers. The resulting list included two liberal arts colleges, two masters institutions, and three research institutions. After securing their willingness to be names for the purpose of this study, COACHE provided this list of institutions to Dr. Norman.

With IRB approval, Dr. Norman then contacted each site's chief academic officer or chief faculty affairs officer, as well as the chief elected faculty leader, for semi-structured interviews. The aim of the interviews was twofold: to better understand why faculty might be reporting relatively high satisfaction and a high incidence of model behaviors at that campus and to learn about any practices or initiatives that might provide further insight into how faculty and administrators understand effective faculty leadership, including how to develop it. The response rate was 93%, missing only one faculty leader at one of the research institutions.

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