

On Enhancing Shared Governance at Northeastern Illinois University

Report and Recommendations

Kenneth Andersen, Professor of Communication Emeritus
University of Illinois Urbana- Champaign

This report is the result of an early March agreement that I would investigate the state of shared governance at the University and offer suggestions for its improvement. Completion of the report was set for April 30 but a series of unanticipated events resulted in a delay of two weeks. I apologize for the delay.

This report was made possible by the participation of many individuals at NEIU including faculty, students, deans, the A&P and Civil Service Councils, and senior administrators. Particular appreciation is owed President Hahs, her staff, and Senate leaders Judith Kaplan-Weinger and Gregory Anderson for setting up interview schedules, open meeting times, and facilitating campus visits. I particularly appreciate the candor and responsiveness and the commitment to the University found in my interactions on the campus.

This report is the result of the interviews, most extensively with faculty, and material reviewed. The material included the Faculty Constitution, Senate Bylaws, Administrative Memoranda, Board of Trustees Bylaws, civil service survey results, the Strategic Plan Initiative, reports of the North Central Association accreditation visits and numerous individual letters and emails. All individuals were promised comments would be confidential but that also precluded identification of the sources of the valuable suggestions garnered.

Organization of the Report

- First, the value and requirements of a system of shared governance.
- Second, a summary of issues and concerns identified.
- Third, suggested possible ways to improve the process.

The third section offers suggestions that apply to the university community generally but focus on faculty and administration interactions to strengthen shared governance. There is no attempt to treat specific issues at a departmental level and only briefly at the college level. Each department

and college has its own traditions and systems, so meaningful specific suggestions would require a study of that unit. Departments and colleges are urged to undertake such a review on their own initiative.

- Fourth, it offers a brief prognosis for the future of shared governance at Northeastern Illinois University.

Shared Governance

The shared governance process that characterizes United States higher education is recognized as a key factor in its internationally recognized quality. Shared governance utilizes the expertise of appropriate participants to seek an optimal decision. This requires establishing procedures that create a basis for needed input in terms of information, appropriate deliberation by affected parties, and determining who is responsible for making the decision and for its implementation. The Board of Trustees has the responsibility for managing the University, a responsibility best met through a robust system of delegation of decision making to an administrative structure that fully utilizes the expertise and experience of its faculty, staff and students to fulfill the University's educational mission.

There is no one modal of an ideal university shared governance system. Each system reflects the history and culture of the institution, the personalities that shaped it, and the governance system's response to issues with which it has dealt. Currently, the shared governance system must respond to changes in institutional mission, growing diversity of students, changing societal needs, explosive expansion of knowledge in existing and new disciplines, and new technologies while dealing with dwindling state financial support for and intrusion into public higher education.

Faculty should retain responsibility for the curriculum, course content, evaluation of students, selection and evaluation of colleagues, and appropriate participation in selection and evaluation of administrators. Faculty also need to assume an active role in educational policy decisions that extend far beyond their discipline and unit, a role normally accomplished through elected faculty representatives acting on behalf of the faculty.

If a shared governance system does not accept responsibility to deal with issues in a timely fashion and recognize and respond to the multiple changes in the environment of higher education, the system becomes irrelevant both in terms of its advice and decisions. If so, decisions will be made by higher administration, trustees, or the legislature on matters where faculty should be the dominant voice in the decisions. The contribution made by functioning systems of shared governance is required if universities are to prosper and maintain the values central to their educational mission. A strong shared governance system is needed for faculty to participate in decisions about the allocation of resources, many involving reductions, not additions. Legislative mandates such as performance based funding require faculty decisions on criteria.

Recent decades have seen major changes in shared governance systems. Participation in “faculty” senates has been extended to a much greater range of participants; the importance of shared communication among various groups has increased; the pace of decision making has increased as has the impact of external forces on the process, often requiring governance to be more reactive than proactive. Many varied new governance structures have developed: university senates, graduate student senates, councils of groups other than faculty, academic professional senates, groups external to the senate represented on its committees. This may produce a variety of inputs to the higher administration with the necessity to rationalize the process and to determine the relative weight given advice of different stakeholders.

As noted above, a healthy shared governance system requires access to relevant information; adherence to established written procedures revised as needed rather than bypassed; extensive communication including feedback among the parties, and differentiation of advisory and decision making responsibilities. There is a constant need to assess the shared governance system in terms of its role, structure, participants, quality of advice offered and decisions made. This means ongoing monitoring by participants in the process and mandated periodic reviews to ensure the process is working optimally.

A department offers its members the option of maximum participation in a shared governance system: the opportunity to develop and live out the social contract for the department. This includes participation in developing bylaws, resolving curriculum issues, selecting textbooks, building collegial relationships, evaluating colleagues, assessing departmental needs, and planning for the unit's future. The department is the birthplace of shared government experience and the place where most disagreements and grievances can be resolved.

Issues Identified, Suggestions Offered

A Cautionary Word: Initially in developing this report, I was troubled that summarizing the issues found would deepen a sense of malaise. But as I worked through the analysis, I found that many of the issues had a long history, some identified in the North Central Association 2007 report. While some issues had existed for several years, for others the specifics were comparatively recent but the pattern relatively old. Past practices and culture continue to impact the campus negatively because the system of shared governance did not resolve the issues. The University has the opportunity and capacity to strengthen its actual exercise of shared governance rather than the process existing on paper.

1. **Communication Problems:** Every constituency noted problems in communication. These include top down communication, lack of lateral communication within and among constituent groups, failure to acknowledge/respond to communications in a timely fashion, inadequate time to respond, failure to provide justification for negative actions on recommendations.
2. **Violation of academic decision structures:** Administrators, individuals and units bypass normal decision levels where information/recommendations/decisions move from department to college to higher administration levels such as the provost or president or vice-versa or fail to involve relevant participants in the decisions at a given level. The role of the provost was identified as of particular concern in this regard. This pattern has led to issues moving to top administrative levels without appropriate/any consideration at intervening levels. Deans, department chairs, mid-level

managers or individuals are often denied their proper participation in decisions relevant to their units and thus feel they are not valued. While this concern is most prevalent in the academic decision structure, it exists in other constituencies as well.

3. Confused lines of authority: Clear lines of authority and a fixing of responsibility for decisions should replace what is seen as an unclear, at times chaotic, decision-making structure. This is linked to a concern about micromanaging by the provost. It is often unclear who made or has the responsibility for making particular decisions. Decision making structures and policies need to be public, established through a consultative process, readily available in written form, and followed.
4. Need for a sense of participation: A failure to feel part of the process is evidenced in each constituency. The statement in the February 26, 2007, report of the Higher Learning Commission still resonates: “. . . those internal to the institution feel isolated from the flow of idea exchange, formation of policy, identification of needs and services, and participation in the planning process. The delivery of decisions rather than participation in shaping the decision and the absence of rationale has the effect of leaving constituents . . . feeling undervalued and overpowered at times.” (P. 5.)
5. Violation of existing procedures/requirements: This occurs in many contexts from processes within the senate to particular academic decisions. Existing procedures provide viable patterns of shared governance, but often are not utilized. Non-functional requirements are not reviewed, modified or eliminated, valid requirements not met.
6. Disregard of faculty subject-matter expertise: Faculty expertise whether individual or in a departmental decision is not valued as demonstrated when recommendations are overturned without explanation or search committee memberships and positions descriptions are redone despite units being in the best position to judge their needs and appropriate candidates. A reasonable ratio of faculty members and senior level faculty participation on search committees may be lacking.

7. Ombudsperson and grievance procedures needed to resolve issues: Some issues--individual, unit, or group--remain unresolved for extended periods of time undermining trust and morale. Every constituency expressed the need for an ombudsperson. Groups not having a grievance procedure in place and individuals or groups with grievances that fall outside union contract provisions want an established grievance procedure as well. An end point to the grievance process both in terms of time and level to which grievances may be taken is needed. When particular issues indicate a systemic problem, that aspect should be addressed as well.
8. Failure to resolve issues at the appropriate level: Too many issues come to higher administrative levels that should be resolved by the unit or college. This pattern has become ingrained over at least a decade exacerbated by a failure of higher administrative levels to insist that issues move through the appropriate step-by-step process.
9. Need to facilitate communication among all constituencies: A university council (or university senate) would facilitate communication and could address common issues.
10. Instructors need a voice: The role and rights of Instructors need to be addressed. Instructors-- some with Ph.D.s, many full-time, some having taught for more than a decade—play a major role in NEIU classrooms. Instructors lack the protection of academic freedom given tenured faculty, have unclear voice and voting rights at the unit level, and no meaningful role in the governance structures of the University. NEIU is dependent upon them and their numbers will continue to grow.
11. Valuing NEIU as a community: NEIU needs a greater sense of community with units and individuals seeking outcomes that benefit the institution as a whole. Unit activities, decisions and long range plans need to tie to the Strategic Plan Initiative.
12. High level of frustration: Non-faculty do not believe shared governance is functioning effectively. Given the inability to resolve contract issues, the persistence of particular issues unresolved to the satisfaction of parties involved, inability to move forward in a unified way on multiple issues,

frustration levels are high. This may tie to a lack of civility and respect in treatment of colleagues or individuals in a different constituency.

13. Freedom of speech: Protecting freedom of speech is a central value in higher education. Maintenance of a healthy climate for free speech requires recognition of the responsibilities that accompany it. Assurance is sought that individuals are not penalized for exercising their free speech rights as some individuals believe has occurred.

Suggestions

14. The Faculty Constitution and Senate Bylaws need to be revised to accord with current practice, improve the quality of governance at all levels, and build a broader base of participation in governance including instructors and centers not on the main campus. The Senate needs to focus on university-wide educational policy issues rather than grievances that should be handled in other ways.
15. College Assemblies are not meaningful opportunities for shared governance activity nor do they serve the needs of the respective colleges. The assemblies do not serve the normal functions of college faculty meetings that act upon recommendations vetted by standing committees. The current system contributes to the tendency to bypass the college and college deans in decisions.
16. Support for departmental chairs: Chairs feel at some risk as they make difficult decisions that are sometimes undercut at higher levels. Only tenured faculty should serve as chairs with responsibilities clearly defined and with appropriate support from higher administration.
17. Training and mentoring is a need of all new administrators and department chairs.
18. Greater participation of emeritus faculty would enrich the campus.

Improving Shared Governance

University Wide

All activity within the university community has the potential to impact shared governance systems. The existence of a sense of community, common purpose, trust, mutual respect, open communication and participation are grounded in manifold interactions and activities. Hence, this section begins with activities that serve to build a sense of community. These suggestions may appropriately be applied at the individual unit level, in student activities, in offices and to the entire university community. Narrowly applied, the suggestions could be seen as “team building efforts.”

Building a sense of community: a sampling of possibilities: The suggested activities are not novel but provide opportunities to enrich the academic and community environment and simultaneously build a sense of community.

Developing the Strategic Plan Initiative was an example of diverse groups working together to achieve a common end. That process is still valued for building bridges among individuals and groups. Similar campus-wide efforts could have the same impact.

Units on a rotating basis could host an open house showcasing their work and its impact: true whether artists, scientists, poets, linguists, historians. People are interested in hearing others share what it is they do, amazed at what they learn, and the connections to what they themselves do.

Faculty lectures or seminars whether departmental, college, or campus-wide will highlight the work of others and provide bridges for understanding and valuing their contributions. Example: A seminar on ethical issues could unite a diverse group.

Using emeritus faculty as mentors, sources of institutional or unit history, or preretirement advisers could continue their university involvement and be of continued value to the campus.

Campus-wide activities offer significant possibilities. These could include a semester/year lecture series on a topic such as academic freedom or shared governance; a campus-wide focus on a particular book; a week dedicated to a particular community activity, charity drive, GLBTQ concerns; or exploration of

a particular culture in terms of its art, foods, dress, religion, etc. Such activities have the potential to involve every constituency, student, academic and non-academic and attract members in the surrounding community.

Strengthening the hierarchical structure of academic decision making: No issue received greater emphasis by the faculty than the sense that the proper level for and steps in decision making were too frequently violated. Numerous other issues are closely linked including inadequate communication flow, lack of timely response, unwarranted interference in departmental choices, lack of respect for faculty and their disciplinary expertise.

“The faculty has primary responsibility for such fundamental areas as curriculum, subject matter and methods of instruction, research, faculty status, and those aspects of student life which relate to the educational process. On these matters the power of review or final decision lodged in the governing board or delegated by it to the president should be exercised adversely only in exceptional circumstances, and for reasons communicated to the faculty.” (AAUP Policy Documents and Reports, 10th ed., P. 139.) The report adds that faculty should have the opportunity for a further response. The statement also notes potential limitations of budget, personnel policies, and policies of those with jurisdiction over the institution. Faculty should be involved in the exchange of ideas, formation of policy and in the planning process as should other constituencies affected by the decision.

Faculty insist the need to utilize faculty expertise and disciplinary understanding has not been honored in terms of position descriptions being redone and search committee recommendations rejected with a further search cancelled without a meaningful rationale provided for rejecting faculty recommendations and provided evidence of procedural requirements being violated.

A shared governance remedy is clear. The role of the department, the college, and provost should be defined in terms of responsibility for specific decisions and required movement through appropriate academic steps, justification provided for any reversal of a recommendation, and an

opportunity for further input. The steps in the process should be rigorously followed at every level from individual faculty member to chair, to dean, to provost or similar levels in other university decision structures.

The proper procedural steps need to be clearly defined and publicly available with full compliance by all parties. If the proper procedural steps have not been followed, it is the responsibility of the next senior official to insist that be done.

Written procedures developed with and periodically reviewed by the participants are likely to be efficient and followed and clarify the decision making structures seen at times as unclear and chaotic, a concern of all constituencies. If unclear, chaos is almost inevitable. Periodic mandated reviews of existing procedures should be required. The process employed by the interim Vice-President for Student Affairs has been beneficial for that unit and provides a model for other units. The bylaws for the Council on Academic Affairs and the recently created budget group are other examples.

Adhering to procedures means respect for each contribution to the process and eliminates the temptation to bypass approved steps and go directly to the top, a problem cited as significant in the past.

Improving communication: a need for all constituencies. A need to improve communication was voiced by every constituency and an issue raised in external evaluations. Realistically, this concern will never be completely alleviated. The sheer amount of communication activity means breakdowns will occur. Second, the communication process involves at least two individuals, each deciding how and what they communicate interchangeably as speaker or listener, writer or reader.

If individuals consider the following three points the sense of inadequate communication may be reduced. First, distinguish what might be interesting to know (x is dating y) versus what is essential or helpful in meeting a responsibility. If the latter, decide who needs to know what in what time frame. Oral communications reiterated in writing and establishing schedules

and timetables for decision points limit communication breakdowns just as joint agreement on changes does.

Second, assess the requirements of a response on the part of those communicating. What may be a routine request for one is an urgent request needing an immediate response for the other. Thus, as much specific information by the parties about what is required in and through the communication process eliminates many instances of “inadequate communication.”

Third, find the proper end point for a communication interchange. Is it just announcing the decision or are reasons needed? Is further communication needed or does this end the matter? Two communicators may hold widely variant views of the needed response. Ideally either can continue the communicative exchange but pressures of time and commitment may prevent that. Issues can arise from excessive communication but are more likely to rise if there is too little.

The campus has undertaken efforts to improve the communication process such as the *NEIUpport*, the efficacy of which is not yet clear. It is undertaking a review of Administrative Memoranda.

While communication vertically within an administrative structure is essential, lateral communication is important as well and essential in an office or for a working team. A university council (assembly or senate) drawing together representatives from the four constituencies could be a major facilitator as issues are brought to the group with reports back to the constituencies represented. Many issues could be addressed such as nighttime security, campus access at off hours, building maintenance, etc. Initially a university council might not be given the authority to make decisions but simply raise issues of campus concern and offer recommendations to other groups. In time, it could be given responsibility for some decisions and authority to make recommendations in its own name, ultimately becoming a university senate.

The Council of Chairs and Coordinators is an example of a group responding to the need for lateral communication in sharing of ideas to enhance understanding of issues and the effectiveness of its members.

Resolution of grievances: an ombudsperson and grievance process.

Several individuals and groups have called for creation of an ombudsperson or a small group serving that function. Given the breadth of interest, whoever takes on the task must consult widely.

A second call is for established grievance procedures where none now exist including faculty grievances that do not fall under the union contract grievance procedure. Establishing both approaches to resolve disputes and grievances would be useful: if the efforts of the ombudsperson fail to resolve an issue it could move to the formal grievance process. Presumably an issue could be brought to the ombudsperson at any time. A grievance process usually starts following a failure to resolve the matter in the usual procedural ladder for that type of decision.

The need for creation of these approaches is urgent. The campus has a history of “controversial issues” remaining unresolved. Dealing with concerns or grievances through these mechanisms should improve the campus climate. Normally, disputes or potential grievances are resolved in a one-to-one discussion by two participants. If not, most disputes should be resolved at the departmental or unit level. If that fails, resolution should fall to the college(s). If these systems are working well, few issues would move beyond the college level unless they relate to actions at upper administrative levels. Fewer grievances will reach the vice presidents or president that should have been resolved at a prior level and should be returned to that level.

For resolution of grievances beyond the creation of the two new structures, the shared governance system needs to devise a way to create an end point when the appeal opportunities are exhausted

The Senate

Given the time since the last revisions, both the Faculty Constitution and Senate Bylaws need to be reviewed and updated. At least one provision of the senate bylaws does not align with the faculty constitution. While the Senate has an array of standing committees, several do not function. Given the size of the instructors as a group, recognition in the Bylaws of the Trustees as “faculty” and inclusion in the faculty union, the question of the proper role of instructors (and adjuncts) in individual units and in the decision-making structures of the University needs to be addressed. The Senate needs to increase its focus on educational policy issues.

The size and functions of the Senate warrant examination. Attendance at meetings sometimes does not meet quorum requirements and the elected alternates do not fill in. Is it possible that (1) enlarging the Senate to be more representative of the total faculty (including instructors) and faculty not on the main campus; (2) accomplishing much of its work through standing committees that research issues within their domain and prepare action items for senate consideration; and (3) the full Senate meet less frequently based on the number of action items and information transmission needs would strengthen the Senate?

To facilitate communication across the campus and among its various components, the Senate could invite designated liaisons from those entities to attend Senate meetings and report to their constituencies. Non-senators, whether faculty or drawn from other campus entities, may be helpful additions to committees that profit from the expertise of those individuals.

The faculty constitution: This document should be reviewed in the context of the Senate Bylaws review since the two are intertwined.

This document, administrative memoranda and other documents pose the question of whether it would be useful to develop a more comprehensive university governance document detailing the internal structure of the university, its various key offices and officers, and associated responsibilities, provide for colleges and departments, and stipulate various requirements such as bylaws, require advisory/executive committees for deans and department

heads, and detail Senate responsibilities. The chain of command for various academic decisions including those vested in the individual units or faculty as a whole would be delineated. Many of the concerns raised in this report about the shared governance processes ranging from clarification of the locus of responsibility for various decisions, enforcing a step-by-step structure for campus decisions, to issues of the role of college deans and roles of faculty identified as “instructors” would be addressed in the process. Materials could come in part from the Board of Trustees Bylaws, Administrative Memoranda, the existing Faculty Constitution and Senate Bylaws, and other sources.

Such a review cannot be undertaken without serious consideration of what is involved. It would consume a good deal of time, energy and effort of many people at various stages of the process while raising questions about the way in which the university is functioning versus how it should function. Crucial to its success would be assigning tasks to various appropriate subgroups, establishing a time line for elements to be reviewed and for final decisions.

Question: If Northeastern Illinois University was created today, what structure and procedures would maximize the quality of the institution? The Strategic Plan Initiative in a sense began such a process. What is the next logical step?

N.B. Activity related to findings/suggestions in this report must not wait for such a review to be undertaken; it may never be done given the complexity of the effort and the risks associated with it. Rather, individuals and groups should consider elements of this report as a basis for moving forward in an order and process they determine.

Three Recommendations for Specific Campus Areas

The College: The colleges vary significantly in size and specific mission. Unlike colleges on many campuses, the NEIU colleges to a varying degree do not seem to play as central a role in academic decisions. True, budget constraints have centralized some responsibilities but deans still have key roles in the discussions of position and budget allocation. They need to play a very

active role in monitoring departments, department quality and leadership. Colleges could use a system of active standing committees and college-wide faculty meetings.

Deans should not only have significant roles that carry significant responsibilities in the academic decision making structure but also should be held accountable for meeting them. Without providing specifics suggestions, to the degree the impressions garnered in the interviews and materials for this report are accurate, the provost, the deans, and the faculties of the college should consider possible changes.

One clear concern is the role of the faculty assemblies which seem neither to be well attended nor useful in the college decision processes although this varies with the college. As part of the review of the Faculty Constitution, the utility of the college assemblies must be assessed in consultation with the deans.

Departmental Leadership: Department chairs and coordinators are given significant responsibilities for managing various functions in their unit. They serve as important links in the communication of material to other administrative levels and from those levels to their colleagues. To the extent possible they should be tenured faculty. They often have to make significant decisions that will not please all in the unit. Thus, they merit support as warranted from deans and higher administration. New department chairs should be provided assistance in learning the distinctive nature of their role and responsibilities and mentored during the early periods of such service with the dean providing ongoing mentoring as needed. Since many conflicts that become grievances arise at the unit level, they need skills in mediation and conflict resolution. Every conflict resolved at the unit is of great value for other university levels.

Note: Similar calls for training and mentoring have been voiced in non-academic units.

Instructors: Instructors are recognized as members of the faculty in the Bylaws of the Trustees and are included in the faculty bargaining unit. Instructors are a major source of instruction at NEIU. Some have served for extended periods of more than ten years and some hold doctoral degrees, publish and do research, and exhibit a strong commitment to the institution. In a time of reasonable financial support, many of these individuals would be on the tenure track and some tenured.

NEIU is not unique in its growing reliance upon non-tenured faculty. Given the commitment of these individuals to the institution and intimate role interacting with students, they should be given an appropriate voice in the institution. As a minimum, they need to be given a voice within units and colleges and in the broader decision making structures of the institution. The limits of their role and responsibilities need to be determined respectively for and at individual unit, college, and the university levels. Some, by no means all, wish to be included in governance at the various levels. While their vote is not appropriate on some issues, voice on others may benefit all.

Instructors as a group should consider developing an organizational structure to give voice to their concerns to the larger university community.

The University should weigh the implications of service by instructors in terms of its educational mission. In the process it might address questions such as the following: Should longer term contracts replace yearly contracts for instructors after some years of service? Are instructors evaluated and feedback provided? Should additional means of recognition for outstanding or long-time service be developed? How should participation in governance activity be supported? How can the academic freedom of instructors be offered maximum protection?

Prognosis for the Future of Shared Governance

A sound shared governance process is of significant value to the institution. The fate of shared governance and its ability to be of significant service to the university is determined by members of the community itself, collectively and

individually. Not all will be active in shared governance activity but all are affected by it. Those active should be held accountable for their work and receive support as merited.

Undergirding this report is a strong belief that the Northeastern Illinois University community has the wish and the capacity to improve the shared governance processes by evaluating and revising existing procedures and committing to follow them. A viable shared governance system continually reinvents itself given changes in participants, disciplines, instructional methods and modalities, student populations, societal needs, and opportunities and challenges posed by external realities.

It is imperative that the external forces that are reshaping higher education are monitored by faculty for their impact upon the institution and the educational process. Tuition has risen sharply and will continue to do so, posing a variety of risks to students, diversity goals, and institutional priorities. A strong shared governance system is essential to participate in decisions about how to respond to external constraints and interventions.

At least three limitations on the ability to move forward into a governance system that functions more effectively must be noted.

First, more adjustments may be required than are highlighted in this report and those affected within the university must make the decision to address them. A strong commitment to do the work needed to move forward is essential.

Second, institutional cultures are not easy to change. Any change in a culture is slow, not easily or immediately recognized. Patterns have become established that violate existing shared governance standards and procedures, patterns that became part of the culture. The frustration and lack of trust that exists is linked to two no confidence votes in presidents, one vote of no confidence in the provost, and a previous faculty strike with another one possible. This has eroded trust in existing shared governance and created a culture that makes healthy shared governance more difficult to achieve.

Third, issues noted in the accreditation report need to be addressed and violations of agreed upon normative processes in academic decisions eliminated through shared governance processes. Individual and unit grievances are continuing irritants and have affected the shared governance process. While small in number and limited in scope, these grievances need to be resolved, whether through arbitration, mutual concessions or an acceptance of the existing reality to enable shared governance to move forward.

A Postscript

Significant changes in top administrative personnel have and will occur and searches for some positions are under way. As faculty retire, the faculty profile will shift. New leadership provides the opportunity to ask: “Who and where are we? What and where do we want to be? How do we get there? Can we seize this opportunity?”

Ken Andersen