

# College Heights Herald

## The Myth of Shared Governance in Higher Education



Students walk toward Cherry Hall on the first day of classes at WKU on Aug. 25 in Bowling Green. Mike Clark/HERALD

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January 31, 2023

“Mr. President, we are not employees of the university. We are the university.” Some of you are no doubt familiar with this quote. It was the response Isidore Rabi, a distinguished member of the faculty at Columbia University, had for President Dwight Eisenhower, who referred to the faculty as “employees of the university” in 1950.

Ike was president of Columbia from 1948 to 1953.

Once upon a time, there was considerable truth to Rabi’s statement. What the faculty decreed almost always went unchallenged and was implemented in an unambiguous manner. Only rarely was the faculty’s sovereignty questioned, much less overturned by an administrator (or any other stakeholder). And if the faculty voted no confidence in a leader – from the president on down – that individual’s days were numbered.

Sadly, at most colleges and universities across the nation, this is no longer the case. The voice of the faculty is increasingly marginalized by those who think they know more about running the enterprise than those who teach and conduct research. And the consequences of this shift have not been beneficial to either the institutions or the students they serve. The rise of a more managerial control strategy has been inversely proportional to the decline in the perceived efficacy of our colleges and universities.

Want to know why the academy is currently in a state of perpetual crisis? Look no further than the attitudes and dispositions of those in positions of power at the local, state, and national levels. No one who has not spent years in the classroom should ever be allowed to oversee the educational process in either the public schools or on our campuses. This is as true for college presidents, provosts, vice presidents and deans as it is for superintendents, principals, coordinators and program directors.

Want to pinpoint exactly when academia began its slow yet unequivocal decline toward mediocrity and potential irrelevance? A good candidate might be the 1983 publication of “A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform,” by the National Commission on Excellence in Education. Although the report was aimed primarily at elementary and secondary schools, it didn’t take long for those who wanted more control over higher education to use it as a rationale for implementing their agenda at the postsecondary level.

By-the-way, whether we were actually “at risk” is still the subject of intense debate among scholars who continue to study the era in which the treatise was produced.

Unfortunately, the idea that we need more administrative oversight to save us from ourselves has only continued to grow and expand over the intervening decades. There seems to be this narrative that faculty are no longer capable of providing the leadership needed to successfully navigate the immense challenges that lie ahead. We need administrators to take the wheel and steer the ship clear of the icebergs that are always just over the horizon.

One consequence of the 1983 report was the gradual introduction of the business model that’s currently all the rage in higher education. According to this philosophy, colleges and universities need to be run just like any other large corporation, with financial considerations being the key component of the decision-making process. Departments become independent revenue centers, faculty become employees, and students become customers.

Look around, we’re not that far from realizing this hideous vision of what higher education should ultimately become. Obviously, in this incarnation of our collective future, faculty are merely employees of the enterprise. So Rabi’s assertion might not be as credible in 2023.

But what about shared governance? Aren’t faculty equal partners in the operation of the institution? Don’t they have an equivalent voice in the development of policies and procedures that are designed to further the interests of the campus community?

You tell me.

According to the American Association of University Professors, “The role of the faculty is to have primary responsibility for such fundamental areas as curriculum, subject matter and methods of instruction, research, faculty status, and aspects of student life which relate to the educational process. The responsibility for faculty status includes appointments, reappointments, decisions not to reappoint, promotions, the granting of tenure, and dismissal. The faculty should also have a role in decision-making outside of their immediate areas of primary responsibility, including long-term planning, budgeting, and the selection, evaluation and retention of administrators.”

Wake up.

Today, most administrators barely give lip service to the concept of shared governance. When one party – and in many cases, one individual – has the authority to veto what a majority of the faculty have decided, then shared governance is nothing more than a cruel joke. If we truly had shared governance, the faculty senate (or whatever the analogous representative body is at the institution) would have the ability to override the veto of the president, provost, vice president, dean or anyone else thinks they should have the right to prevent the wishes of the faculty from becoming reality.

Concentrated power is always dangerous, as Matthew Dean Hindman observed in a piece he wrote in 2021:

“Trustees and administrators, meanwhile, often perceive shared governance—and governance shared with the faculty, in particular—as archaic and unsuited to the various changes sweeping higher education. Moreover, they are likely to view the faculty’s public responsibility not as an inherent good but as a barrier to sound management.”

I, for one, think he gets it exactly right.

I’m old enough to remember when faculty were at least considered equal partners in the decision-making process at most institutions – which was a viable model and the way institutions should minimally operate these days. No single individual, administrator, faculty member, or board member, should have the right to overturn a policy that has been developed and passed through the multiple levels of the approval process. Ever.

If higher education is to remain relevant in the decades to come, control of the direction of colleges and universities need to be wrestled out of the hand of the self-proclaimed saviors and returned to those who rightfully should be in charge: the faculty.

Or – at a bare minimum – let’s have real shared governance. Not the one-sided version that permeates most institutions these days.

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