

# CHAPTER

## Recent Changes in the Structure and Governance of American Research Universities

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**T**he manner in which research universities in the United States and in Europe operate to achieve their missions has evolved dramatically over the past century; so must their governance structures, if they are to continue as powerful and effective contributors to knowledge and the global economy.

American research universities at the turn of the twentieth century overwhelmingly adopted the German model: internal governance mirrored the division of knowledge into disciplinary departments or colleges, each with considerable autonomy to establish its own rules and make its own hiring, tenure, and promotion decisions. The overall university then grew as a collection of departments and colleges overseen and administered collectively by a president or chancellor who, in turn, was responsible to a governing board of lay individuals. This is a model that maximizes the autonomy of disciplines and attaches the loyalty of faculty first to their discipline, second to their department or college, and only third to the collective institution—the university of which they are a part. Over the decades, this has proven to be a very powerful model for driving first-rate scholarship and the training of future researchers. Coupled with a national commitment to investing in basic and applied scientific research, it has propelled American research universities into the top ranks recognized around the world. It is a model that worked well for the first half of the twentieth century.

In the 1960s, however, the social and political environment of American universities began to change significantly. College attendance in the United

States swelled dramatically in the post-World War II years, from about 15% of the total population before the War to nearly 50% today. Propelled by the G.I. Bill, and a booming economy, states began to establish large numbers of new universities to fulfill a universal dream to go to college. The mandate of these new public universities was unabashedly pragmatic—to prepare graduates for the workforce, to expand the frontiers of knowledge, especially in the sciences, agriculture, and technology, and to provide an entry credential for their graduates into the middle class American dream of prosperity—a home, a car, and leisure time, and the expectation of a continually rising standard of living.

In this new environment, governments paid the lion's share of the bill for public higher education and expected universities to be responsive to the broader needs of society. For the most part, they were not disappointed. But as the century wore on, strains began to develop between the incentives of decentralized “shared governance” organization of universities and the expected pace of change and responsiveness desired by political and corporate stakeholders. Research universities particularly were criticized for sacrificing teaching to their research mission, for neglecting undergraduate education and for being too slow to accommodate to more rapid changes occurring in American economy and society as it moved into global competition.

This paper notes four trends in American university governance that have significantly affected our research universities in the past few decades:

1. The organization of higher education into statewide university systems;
2. The changing nature and role of governing boards;
3. The progressive weakening of the university presidency;
4. The waning of *traditional faculty governance* and the *expansion of shared governance* to other constituencies within the university.

## ORGANIZATION INTO STATEWIDE UNIVERSITY SYSTEMS

One response to the demand for greater public responsiveness in higher education was to *create statewide higher education systems* to manage and coordinate the many individual institutions within state borders. In the United States today, 45 states have such system structures which are expected to coordinate programming, prevent unnecessary duplication of programs and missions, allocate public funding for higher education equitably, and ensure that educational needs are met statewide. About 80% of all students in higher education in the U.S. today attend an institution that is part of a statewide system (National Association of System Heads, 1994).

Public research universities have been both helped and hindered as members of multi-campus systems. To their *advantage* is that their position as the

flagship institution in most systems is politically protected against the much larger numbers of comprehensive, regional universities with representation in state legislatures, and they often set academic standards for the entire system. Statewide enrollment and admissions policies often manage competition within a system so that research universities can be more selective than would otherwise be politically possible. And, in many systems, much of the lobbying for public financial support is carried by the system organization, freeing research universities, in part, to compete intensively for the private, corporate, and alumni support that underwrite the research mission.

In exchange, research universities must fit into a larger educational network—one based on geography rather than academic mission—and focus curriculum and programs more carefully. Faculty and administrators must attend more conscientiously to the needs of their state and develop habits of collaboration with unlike institutions which would probably not emerge in the absence of statewide higher education systems.

More recently, some higher education systems have begun to evolve in their missions, moving from basic regulatory and coordinating functions to functions that add value to the work of their constituent institutions (Gaither, G., Ed., 1999). The president of the University of Maryland System, Don Langenberg, has identified the functions that systems are uniquely positioned to perform as: *synergy, strategy, efficiency, accountability, and integrity* (Langenberg, D., March-April 1994). To these I would add: *advocacy* (for the value of sustaining educational opportunity and affordable access), and the ability to *push for reform of state government* practices that enable universities to adopt more effective and competitive administrative and operating procedures (Lyll, K. C., 1996). These trends help public research universities gain some traction in a political environment in which they might otherwise be out-voted and out-flanked by more parochial, short-term interests.

## THE CHANGING ROLE OF GOVERNING BOARDS

Both public and private research universities in the U.S. have lay governing boards charged with responsibility for the oversight and long-term preservation and enhancement of the institution. Traditionally, boards of trustees (or regents) have served both to buffer the academy from direct political intervention and as advocates for the mission of the academy to the outside worlds of commerce and politics. The governing boards of public universities tend to be visible policymaking entities while the boards of private universities often function less visibly and with more direct fundraising responsibilities for their institutions.

Over the past decade, the role of public university governing boards in particular has been changing, from advocacy to a *greater emphasis on oversight and*

*public accountability* (Association of Governing Boards, 1997). In some instances, members have been elected or appointed to a governing board with an explicit agenda to change or reform the curriculum, appoint or eliminate a particular president, eliminate or install a specific ideology in the institution at large (Smith, M., January-February 1998). It is not surprising, then, that many inside the academy see governing boards in the present day less as buffers against, than as conduits for, the importation of larger political disputes into the campus and the academy (Association of Governing Boards, December 1999). In some cases, this new political agenda militates against financial advocacy for support of the university as well.

A member of the Board of Trustees of the State University of New York expressed it this way:

*“Many trustees have ceded too much of their statutory authority for overseeing public higher education to campus presidents and faculty councils... it is not necessarily in the public’s or the institution’s interest for trustees reflexively to press for ever-higher government subsidies for the colleges and universities they oversee, even though some administrators and faculty members see that as trustees’ primary responsibility.*

*When properly conceived, shared governance can be very advantageous. But when it becomes, in effect, governance by multiple veto by campus groups with vested interests, it can stymie necessary reforms (de Russey, C., October 1996). Similar views were expressed in Virginia (Healy, P., March 1997) and Colorado” (Hebel, S., October 1999).*

The 1990s have been a confusing mixture of diametrically opposed organizational “reforms” across the states: some states (such as New Jersey and Illinois) have *decentralized* their statewide higher education systems by eliminating or reducing the powers of statewide systems and governing boards (Snyder, J., March 1995) (Ohio State University Board of Trustees, May 1997), while other states (such as Minnesota, Pennsylvania, and Virginia) have *centralized and consolidated* their governance structures by creating or consolidating powers in a state coordinating board or a systemwide governing board (Selingo, J., July 1998) (Healy, P., March 1997). Still other states (such as Wisconsin and Maryland) have maintained their statewide system organizations but *streamlined* their functions to decentralize more powers throughout the system and delegate authority from the center to individual campuses (Schmidt, P., November 1998). A few states (such as Montana and Oklahoma) have considered eliminating lay governing boards altogether and placing the governance of higher education with a state secretary of education reporting to an elected governor (Association of Governing Boards, November-December 1995).

While this ferment about the role of governing boards may have reassured policy makers and members of the public that greater oversight and account-

ability is being exercised over universities, the academy itself remains unsure of the larger values for which it is to be accountable (Green, M. F. & Eckel, P. & Hill, B., July-August 1998). Are access and affordability more important than educational quality and performance? Is efficiency more important than excellence in scholarship (inherently an “inefficient” search for truth)? And how should “accountability” be construed for complex organizations like research universities, which receive *multiple* sources of support (government, corporate, foundations, student fees, patent income, gifts and grants, etc.) and have *multiple stakeholders*?

Governing board members often come to appreciate these complexities over time, but the public rhetoric has yet to catch up with the realities of modern university management.

## THE CHANGING UNIVERSITY PRESIDENCY

These confusing crosscurrents are also changing the nature of the university presidency. The presidents of major research universities are CEOs of large and complex enterprises in every sense of that word (Iosue, R. V., March 1997). They are called upon to lead their institutions with vision and wisdom, at the same time they must plan strategically and raise the resources required (Winerip, M., August 1999) to do business in an increasingly competitive environment while maintaining effective political and community relations. Unlike private corporations, major research universities have extensive shared governance traditions that require consultation and, in some instances, formal action by faculty and staff governance organizations before a policy change can be implemented. In the case of public universities, every step of the decision making and implementation process is subject to public reporting, controversy, and scrutiny.

There are a number of signs that the presidency of a public research university is a less attractive and much more difficult position than it once was, and substantially less attractive than the counterpart position in a private university. The average tenure in office for public university presidents has been falling over the past twenty years and is currently only about five years, barely time to get traction on any set of enduring changes on the agenda. Increasingly, experienced university CEOs move from a public university presidency to a private one, but there is very little traffic in the opposite direction (Ross, M. & Green, M., 1998).

John Brandl, professor of public affairs at the University of Minnesota, has observed:

*“Public universities have become arenas for all the big political issues of the day, but, at the same time, the automatic deference that society and politicians used to have toward public universities has eroded”*. (Healy, P., August 1996)

It has become a much more difficult job. In the past three years, a large number of the United States' most prominent public research universities have been in the market for new CEOs, including: the University of Michigan, Ohio State University, University of Maryland-College Park, University of Minnesota, the State University of New York, University of California-Berkeley, University of Iowa, University of Colorado, University of North Carolina, and the University of Texas.

Altogether, the presidencies of 38% of the 58 AAU universities, the United States' most prominent research universities, have changed in the past four years. Increasingly, these changes reflect tensions and confusions between boards and CEOs about the legitimate roles of each. Boards with a political activist philosophy believe that public college presidents should carry out the policies that a particular governor and political party in power espouse, regardless of the president's personal vision for the university or the sentiments of the shared governance organizations on campus. Job announcements and public interviews, however, continue to stress the presidential vision for the university and leadership, not just management skills. General public and press rhetoric also underline the expectation that major university presidents will be independent leaders of their institutions and in their larger communities (Basinger, J., August 1999). This cognitive dissonance is shrinking the pool of ready leadership candidates for university presidencies.

As the Association of Governing Boards noted in its report on "Renewing the Academic Presidency": "*The concept of shared governance must be reformed and clarified to enable colleges and universities to respond more quickly and effectively to the challenges they face. Shared governance must be clarified and simplified so that those with the responsibility to act can exercise the authority to do so. Board members must remember that their allegiance and responsibility is to the institution and the public interest, not to the party that put them on the board. Presidential performance depends on board performance. The president and the board should be reviewed together for the benefit of the institution they serve*". (Association of Governing Boards, 1996)

## THE WAXING AND WANING OF TRADITIONAL SHARED GOVERNANCE

Robert M. Rosenzweig, president emeritus of the American Association of Universities, has noted that shared governance is a pervasive American institution. The U.S. Constitution created a shared governance system that balances the states against the federal government and the three branches of the federal government among themselves. It is, he says, "the only kind of system that could have worked in a society that was hostile to centralized authority.

that valued liberty over order, and in which efficiency in decision making had a much lower priority than the need for institutions that would mediate among competing interests without allowing any to dominate. That is (also) a fair description of a university” (Rosenzweig, R. M., 1998).

And, indeed, criticism of shared governance has grown as the larger environment brings into question whether these basic values are still properly balanced for the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Is reaching consensus still more important than efficient decision making? Is more orderly decision making necessarily a threat to academic liberty? Couldn't we have a better balance of both?

Interestingly, criticisms of the operation of shared governance come from faculty themselves, as well as from boards, administrators, and the public. The latter complain of the long time it takes faculty to decide to address, much less to come to decisions on, critical matters, and the apparent ability of faculty governance processes to obstruct decision making by other actors. Faculty complain of the time consumed in governance matters, which deflects them from their teaching and research; some faculty also complain that governance processes on their campuses have been ‘captured’ by a small group of activists (or in-activists) with special agendas. A national survey conducted by the National Center for Education Statistics in 1993 indicates that faculty in U.S. colleges and universities spend about 11% of their work time (about six hours per week) in committee meetings and other efforts that are part of shared governance procedures. The same survey indicates that faculty report getting less and less satisfaction from their participation in governance, as well.

A second trend on American university campuses has further complicated the structure and practice of governance: at many universities, *shared governance rights have been extended to non-faculty professional staff as well*. These include a large and growing number of computing and technical staff, student services counselors and advisors, housing directors, clinicians, and many other individuals who play essential roles in making the university run smoothly and serve students well. Indeed, it is not uncommon for the overall number of these academic staff to exceed the total number of faculty, so that what originally began as “faculty governance” is now “shared governance” much more broadly construed. Differences of opinion can and do arise between faculty and non-faculty staff, giving presidents and boards a multiplicity of advice and compounding problems of working with competing constituencies.

Finally, at a growing number of American research universities, graduate students and teaching assistants have organized themselves into collective bargaining units. At some universities, these unions have been aggressive and militant, striking for higher wages, benefits and working conditions. Apart from the merit of these claims, the mixing of collective bargaining, an essentially *adversarial* process, with shared governance, an essentially *collegial* pro-

cess, further complicates the overall governance environment of research universities. In private universities, such as Yale, unionized staff bargains directly with the university administration and board, but in some public universities, unionized staff bargain with an executive unit of state government. In these instances, the board and administration employ the faculty and academic staff, but the state employs the classified staff.

Where teaching assistants are unionized, their status within the university—whether they are primarily students who are teaching to learn their trade, or primarily employees who are studying on the side—is often blurred, along with their loyalties and their vision of themselves as professional academics in a shared governance environment. Ensuring merit rewards and equitable treatment across these various categories of employees is often a substantial challenge.

## CONCLUSION

Reviewing these trends—the changing roles of systems of higher education, the divergence in perceived roles of *governing boards*, the progressive weakening of the *presidency*, and the diffusion of traditional “faculty governance” and extension of the *shared governance* franchise to non-faculty staff—one might wonder whether American research universities will be able to maintain their eminence in scholarship nationally and internationally.

And yet, I believe these trends can lead to renewed conceptions of shared governance that will strengthen and enhance our institutions. Americans are a relentlessly inventive lot and our research universities too valuable a national asset to decline. We recognize that we must engage vigorously in the 21<sup>st</sup> century with excellent universities around the world in that unique mixture of competition and academic collaboration that so effectively pushes out the global frontiers of knowledge.

In my view, the Ghon Colloquium provides the right forum for us to identify and focus on the needs to streamline, not abandon, the shared governance policies that have fostered excellence in the past and can continue to do so in the future.

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