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An Examination of Oral Communication Patterns and Emergent Groupings among Faculty Governance Units

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Decision making in higher education is successful when it involves teams who can think critically and creatively about how to solve problems and build consensus within their communities (Bensimon & Neumann, 1993). The academic and practitioner-based literature has supported the notion that when groups are involved in decision-making, more fruitful outcomes can be produced. In the realm of academic affairs, however, where faculty are the constituency to involve, there may be difficulties associated with harnessing the intellect to actualize these benefits. Evidence of this difficulty is the purported success of faculty governance units and their willingness to respond quickly and effectively in a team-fashion to campus-wide decisions (Birnbaum, 1991).

Faculty participation in institutional management takes on many forms, perhaps the most visible of which is the faculty governance unit, typically identified as a faculty or academic senate, council, or forum. The ability of faculty to successfully maneuver through these bodies, and for administrators to shepherd or spearhead ideas and motions through a faculty governance unit is an important skill to be developed. The American Association for Higher Education, for example, even provides training on how to successfully serve as a faculty senate president. At issue no longer is the value of shared authority in higher education, nor situational decision-making, but how these bodies behave and how information is shared and processed within them. The most basic function of the governance unit, that of sharing information and reaching consensus, must be explored to provide a real understanding of how institutional decisions are made.

Gilmour (1991) estimated that there are over 1,500 faculty governance bodies in operation on U. S. college campuses, and baseline research on these bodies indicates that their primary leaders are tenured full-professors from the liberal arts (Miller & Pope, 2001). Although the case may be different in community, junior, and technical colleges, the most basic precept is that governance among equals requires that all voices be heard and represented in decision-making. Referring to even the much-discussed AAUP statement on Academic Governance (1966; 1971), shared decision-making often occurs in a setting where there are many shades of gray and exact boundaries are not known. As Williams, Gore, Broches, and Lostoski (1987) noted, an active governance body could be quite small or quite large, inactive or rebellious, all dependent on the issue and the extent to which an issue addresses core faculty values and beliefs.

To explore and make some preliminary observations on the communication patterns of faculty in decision-making, that is, getting inside “how” decisions are made, the current study involved teams of individuals watching and scoring the deliberations of two different, yet ultimately similar, faculty governance bodies over an academic year. At stake in these observations is the understanding of how faculty from different academic disciplines communicate with each other to identify solutions to complex problems and make recommendations about how an institution should respond. An additional insight provided concerns the type of faculty members involved in decision-making; their common characteristics, views or perceptions about institutional policy or direction, and how a representative democracy works to make decisions for the welfare of an institution.
Findings from the study are important not only for their inherently heuristic value, but also because they provide a rich description of how decision making on campus occurs, and begins a constructive view of the social context of the college campus in terms of decision-making. Subsequently, this notion of a social context is based on the theoretical constructs of Erik H. Erikson where developments in somatic processes are affected and impacted by ego processes, e.g., the dual constructs of conscience and morality. As a result, group dynamics are a compilation of individual histories and the corresponding set of experiences of individual members.

Faculty Co-Governance and Decision-Making

Faculty involvement in governance is structurally based on a theory of work that prescribes worker involvement as a key to productivity, satisfaction, retention, and product quality (Miles, 1965; Birnbaum, 1992). Operationalizing this on the college campus with academic personnel is problematic for a variety of reasons, the most obvious being the lack of consensus on the definition of involved terms. Subsequent problems related to involving faculty in governance activities include issues such as the speed of governance, consensus building, trust or authenticity or decision-making, turfdom, and the appropriate use of data to frame answers and solutions to complex problems (McConnell & Mortimer, 1971). This listing of issues can be perceived as problematic, as the assumption of tight and loose coupling for faculty decision-making (Miller, McCormack, Maddox, & Seagren, 1996) has not been uniformly accepted as a premise of shared governance. Even the most traditional approach to shared governance, where faculty stake claim on the curriculum, has been challenged and at least partially relegated to a faculty privilege rather than a right (Miles, 1997; Minnesota v. Knight, 1984).

Campus leaders almost universally make use of shared governance, operationalizing the idea through some form of faculty governance unit (FGU). The authenticity of using FGUs as either an administrative management strategy on campus or out of the tradition of collegiality has not been fully debated or explored, but its very nature implies a relationship of checks and balances, similar to that in democratic forms of government. The other widely held conceptualization of separate powers contends that bodies such as an FGU serve as a watch-dog body or a base of situational power to protect the institution’s welfare. This latter conceptualization has been reinforced by the identification of value-reaction as a motivation for involvement (Williams, Gore, Broches, & Lostoski, 1987).

Regardless of the political nature of FGUs, they exist on the majority of all campuses, and serve a very real function of representing faculty interests. The existence of FGUs allows collective faculty voices to be heard and for institutional policy to be framed by the academic content of the institution (Gilmour, 1991; Birnbaum, 1992). Of increased importance, then, is the understanding of how bodies process information, build coalitions, and find a common ground to support or challenge institutional issues and decisions.

The foundation of shared governance is not an entirely management-drive strategy; however, as various self-perceived visions of a republican form of college government, it can have an impact on faculty governance (Trow, 1990). These self-perceptions differ widely, from a vantage that vests a Jeffersonian ‘power of the people’ or Lockean doctrine of power derived from the people, to Erikson’s view of ego processes driving behavior and involvement (somatic to social). Somewhat related is the view fostered by John Adams that personal “passions” and desire for social distinction drive human behavior in regards to democratic ideals, and that these passions will always foster competition,
determination, and drive (Ellis, 2001).

Research on faculty involvement in governance is generally divided between findings that senates are effective tools for campus operations and policy, and those that find governance units as barriers to expeditious campus work (Evans, 1999). The disparity of these findings provides a foundation for accepting that senates and governance units are not necessarily tightly coupled with decision-making, and that they can indeed serve a variety of different purposes. One such interpretation of a faculty governance unit is the notion of a “ladder of involvement.” A progressive ladder concept holds that faculty involvement serves different functions based on the type of decision being made, and the type, respect, and manner of those making the decision (Miller, McCormack, Maddox, & Seagren, 1996). Separated into three distinct categories of power distribution, the first level or set of ‘ladder rungs’ comprises therapeutic involvement and manipulation on the part of administrators, thus being labeled “Non-Participation.” The second group of restricted power relationships includes administration informing, consulting, and placating faculty, in a sense granting “token” involvement. The third group, including faculty partnerships, delegated power, and control over decision-making, results in degrees of faculty empowerment (see Figure 1).

These competing interpretations and visions of what academic and faculty senates and councils are and are supposed to do create a context of frustration on many campuses (Rosovsky, 1990). Despite the ‘muddying of the waters,’ faculty governance bodies deal with a wide spectrum of often controversial issues and make meaningful, if non-binding, recommendations. They also provide an important community for scholars on campus to exchange critical ideas and form interdisciplinary relationships; indeed providing the very forum necessary for the university to maintain its unique culture. A look inside these councils provides both illumination about how decisions are made, and an important self-image of the collegium at the beginning of a new century.

Research Procedures

To gain an understanding of the communicative behaviors of the faculty senate participants, observational research techniques were used. These techniques included the rating of each communication episode on a 10-point scoring sheet, which was completed by two teams of observers. Permission to complete the observations was obtained from two faculty senates, and the rating-teams observed nine faculty senate meetings at a research university in the 1998-1999 academic year and eight academic senate meetings at private comprehensive university in the 1999-2000 academic year. The observation team was seated in an inconspicuous location in relation to the faculty body and made every effort not to interact with the senators.

The institutions were selected partially due to their willingness to participate and allow outside reviewers access to every meeting, and partially due to institutional mission. The research university had a decidedly graduate focus, and faculty taught a combination of undergraduate and graduate courses through the dissertation. The comprehensive university faculty focused efforts on teaching at the undergraduate level, with some partial attention to graduate education through a master’s degree. These faculty self-identities are offered in the hope of establishing baseline communication among faculty groupings.

The research university faculty senate studied was comprised of 62 representatives from ten academic colleges. In addition to these representatives who were full-time, tenure-track faculty, there were
representatives from the Provost’s office and the student government body. The private comprehensive university academic senate was comprised of 13 senators total, including eight from the academic colleges (two from each academic school or college) and five at-large appointments, including three university-wide seats and two appointments from the provost.

The faculty senate meetings at each institution were listed as open to the public, although few individuals without a vested interest in the senate decision making or a particular topic attended. Since the purpose for conducting the study was to identify communication channels within the two faculty senates, the 10-point scoring sheet was used to code all oral communication encounters by each faculty senator.

The first phase of data collection included the creation of a 10-question scoring sheet (Table 1). These questions related to the communication episode by individual faculty senators. Each verbal communication was scored by a team of raters, with a possible strength of each episode totaling 10. These items were created with the assumption that if an oral statement was made independent of a request, and that if the statement either produced or continued a conversation, then the statement had a greater group impact and was subsequently more “powerful.”

A total of nine faculty senate meetings was observed at the research university, lasting from 39 minutes to two and one-half hours. The five-member rating team attended all of the meetings. At the end of each meeting, the rating team met with the principal investigator to review the ratings. Any inconsistencies of ratings were discussed at length until agreement on the ratings for each item was reached. At the private comprehensive university, eight academic senate meetings were observed, which lasted from one hour to four hours, with similar follow-up discussions with the principal investigator following each meeting to reach consensus on communication episode ratings.

Data were sorted by individual faculty senators, although later analysis did provide for some clustering of senator comments. A template of the room was provided to the principal investigator, who cross-referenced seating locations with individual names. Although seat assignments were not mandatory, there was a consistency in seating habits.

For initial analysis, only individuals who had made a minimum of 30 oral statements for each average 120-minute period were included. The mean scores for these groups of individuals were collapsed, and overall directional power ratings for each group were computed. These “power ratings” were then correlated using the Pearson Product Moment Correlation with voting patterns on passing legislation, motions, resolutions, bills, and proclamations.

As a cautionary note, it must be noted that although each meeting was filled with situationally meaningful dialogue, each body took relatively few votes. Voting behavior was viewed to be at least partially an example of individual’s ability to influence others to cast a vote in a like manner. The research university FGU conducted 12 votes during the course of the academic year, and the comprehensive university FGU conducted nine votes during the year.

For validation the channels of communication and sources of communication were initially shared with the two faculty senate presidents. These individuals were given an opportunity to verbally and in writing respond and reflect on these communication channels. Their feedback was subsequently collapsed into categories and provided an enriched framework of the findings.
Data Results

Faculty generally did not arrive at their respective meetings well in advance of the posted start-time, and, typically, more individuals arrived during roll call than before. This was somewhat more pronounced at the research university, which was considerably larger than the comprehensive university, suggesting that campus size might have something to do with meeting start-times.

At the research university attendance fluctuated, but generally most faculty senators attended the majority of the meetings. Each meeting began with a roll call, followed by an approval of the distributed and posted (on an Internet site) minutes. Meetings typically began with finishing “old business” from the previous month’s meeting. The Senate President monitored all discussion, called on senators to speak, and accepted responsibility for the progress of the meeting. As a possible result of this leadership for the meeting, the president communicated heavily with the senate secretary.

Oral communication episodes were divided into categories based on their frequency by senator. The result was the clustering of episodes into primary (high) and secondary (lower) categories, using the criteria of at least 30 or more episodes per 120 minutes (on average). In the research university faculty senate, three primary channels were observed: two from the same source (two senators) and one from a single source that took on an adversarial role to the former two senators. The communication “power ratings” of the two senators were mean scores of 7.28 in the direction of the senate president and 7.02 in the direction of the “adversary.” The second primary channel, that of the “adversary,” had a mean rating of 6.79, and was directed back toward the two senators. In comparison, eight secondary channels of communication were observed. Two of the channels were from the two senators who were the source of the primary channels, but were directed toward the senate secretary (mean 7.11), and toward a group of senators seated near the “adversary” (mean 5.2). Secondary channels were also identified between the senate president and the senate secretary (means 8.34 and 8.56, respectively), reflecting a conversational, business oriented communication about the progress and business of the meeting. Four other secondary channels were observed between subgroups seated in the rear of the senate. These also had high mean ratings, and included 9.2 and 9.03 mean ratings in the rear left of the senate meeting, with the later from the source of the “adversary.” The other secondary channel was in the rear right of the senate meeting, with 9.4 and 8.88 mean power ratings between a group of two and three senators, respectively (see Figure 3).

As shown in Figure 4, at the comprehensive university faculty senate a similar phenomenon was observed, where two senators provided three of the five primary communication channels, one of which was in the direction of the faculty senate president (mean 7.10), and the other two senators who took on adversarial-like roles on the opposite side of the senate meeting (mean 8.5 and 6.00). The other two primary channels identified were from two senators seated furthest from the other two senators who provided the three channels, and they similarly directed a line of communication at the senate president (mean 7.80), and in the direction toward the other two frequent speaking senators (mean 8.0). Observed in this body were six secondary communication channels, again within subgroups of individuals seated furthest away from the senate president (means of 8.0 and 7.15, and 6.80 and 8.0), indicating conversations among these subgroups about the topics addressed in the meeting. There was also a within group, two-way communication secondary channel between the vocal senators and a group of two other senators seated several seats away. These communications were relatively conversational, often questioning or asking for further clarification on the part of the vocal senators
Both primary and secondary communication channels were correlated with voting behaviors toward legislation, motions, resolutions, bills, and other proclamations. At the research university, 12 votes were taken over the course of the year (excluding meeting minutes approval and motions to dismiss the meeting). These votes were on topics such as approval of a facility construction plan, a commendation to an outstanding science faculty member, support of a student initiative for a fee increase, and a resolution calling for a revision to the definition of a faculty teaching load. Using the Pearson r, power ratings were correlated with positive voting, and the two highest correlations were identified in the secondary channels between the senate president and senate secretary (r = .89 and r = .90, shown in Figure 3). The primary channel from the vocal senators toward the president also correlated very strongly, with an r = .68. Strong correlations were also identified in the secondary channels between the groups of senators seated in the rear of the room, ranging from an r = .69 to an r = .84. These strong positive correlations indicate that senators, and the president and secretary, are indeed talking to each other, paying attention to what the other parties are communicating, and framing answers and statements in response. The other two secondary channels, those that were one-way, originating from the vocal team of two senators, had a correlation of r = .70 with the secretary and r = .21 with the senators seated near their “adversary.” The other primary channels, those between the vocal senators and their adversary had the lowest correlation with positive voting behavior, with indices of r = .10 and r = .33.

In the comprehensive university, and as shown in Figure 4, voting issues mirrored those in the research university, as voting included a question about workload reporting, several commendations for commitment to the university, and two issues of named endowments were recommended through senate votes. Of the three primary channels originating from the two vocal senators, the strongest correlation to voting behavior was directed at the senate president (r = .85), with other strong, positive correlations for the channels directed at a senators near the other source of primary channel origination (r = .61 and r = .59). So, unlike in the research university senate, the vocal senators talked to individuals near an “adversary,” but not frequently to those individuals. The individuals who were also vocal in the meetings did talk directly to the primary vocal senators (r = .40) and to the senate president (r = .46). Similar to the research university senate, the subgroups of individuals had strong positive correlations with voting behavior. For the subgroup that included the second vocal team of two senators, the sending channel had an r = .80, and they received a channel at r = .89. The senators seated near them had correlations of r = .62 and r = .70. The other two secondary channels included the vocal group of senators, who had a sending r = .54 and a receiving channel of r = .70. This could be interpreted as the vocal senators received meaningful feedback from within this subgroup to the extent that their voting was influenced.

Figures 3 and 4 were shown to their respective faculty senate presidents who both initially displayed some surprise with the dominance of various senate groups. When asked to comment on how they would classify these groupings, they identified the following terms and descriptions of faculty senators. The comments from each of the presidents were transcribed and immediately shared with them. They reviewed the comments, comparing their statements with the categories that were derived from their listings and comments.

Watch-Dog/Rear Guard: These faculty senators see themselves as the appendage to the larger faculty, charged with protecting the institution with their own sacrifice. “They’re a watchdog to campus
administration,” remarked one of the senate presidents. They operate as a loosely defined or organized collection of faculty who would willingly give up their comfort for the welfare of the campus and the faculty at large.

Politician: These leaders see themselves as the future leaders of the campus and administration. Deriving their perceived power from the ability to organize and amass the influence of the collective faculty, these leaders find fulfillment in the process of negotiating between administrators and the faculty senate. These leaders are primarily concerned with power relationships.

Puppet: These senators find their own hope, aspirations, and enjoyment of the process of the faculty senate from gaining the approval of campus administration. These senators are reactionary in nature, and often see diplomacy as their trademark characteristic in brokering decisions between the faculty.

Rebel: Also seen as the “vigilante,” these concerned senators find some enjoyment in the open challenging of administrations, trustees, and even faculty groups that appear compliant to administrative interests. These senators typically see themselves as the true defenders of faculty interests, and concentrate their efforts on taking pre-emptive actions and challenging administrative actions.

Tactician: Seen as the faculty senate ‘mechanic,’ these senators play out their roles as those most concerned about the process rather than the content of decisions. Primarily focusing agenda, they often see their role as one of surviving an elected term.

Idealist: These senators get tremendous personal fulfillment from the action of being involved and the actual participation in governance activities. These faculty members are more likely to be discriminating in selecting issues to challenge and support, have excellent participation records, and feel an obligation to make sure that the institution is being served. They see service as “their turn,” and comply.

Conclusions and Discussions

On one level, the vocal nature of a relative few gave the impression of almost an aristocracy arising within the faculty senate body. The relative few, through their active participation, appeared to control the work of the entire body. On closer examination, though, these senate leaders yielded a smaller influence in actual decision-making, and exerted perhaps a lesser degree of influence than they might have imagined. Indeed, their constant vocal nature may have provided even a disincentive for participation or the creation of a reactionary ‘voting block.’ With so few formal votes taken, however, this would be difficult to accurately argue over a long-term period of time.

There is a real need to identify the proximate power bases of these faculty senates and the subsequent realistic determination of where power bases for decision-making lie within the institution. Based only on the channels of communication, the senates appeared to be elitist or reputational; that is, one group in this community of scholars is responsible for decision-making, and this group indeed gives the perception of having a realistic power base. When considering the correlations with positive voting, however, more of a pluralistic or decisional definition arises, as several groups can be identified that make political decisions. This notion of pluralism historically embraces a John Adams notion of republican motivation, as responses to the heart or true passions ignite the flexing of political power.
Some combination of these two domains is probably at work, suggesting a combinationalist synthesis of defining power where there may indeed be one elite entity (the senate) with two distinct parts.

So did the teams think creatively and critically about new and different strategies for problem solving? The channels certainly suggest that there are multiple dialogues occurring at the same time, and that consensus and teams of individuals are naturally arising. The high correlation of voting behavior indicates that there is an exchange of substance happening, which, perhaps, provides initial evidence that a forum and an opportunity for authentic communication does exist. This forum is accepted with caution, however, as the verbal dominance of conversations by a relative few certainly does provide a possible disincentive for others to be involved, and perhaps share at the body-wide level.

Unlike the Jeffersonian or Lockean doctrines undergirding democracy and republican governments, though, not all participants are created equal. To what extent the distribution of power and “wealth” exist, is largely an area for expanded study and discussion. This also provides some foreshadowing to the notion of patriotism and the John Adams argument, as reinforced by the Don Williams team of researchers, of passion as the driving motivation for involvement and ambition.

The faculty senate presidents identified labels for different senate groups, and these labels represent perhaps a combination of stereotypes and representations of what those with daily exposure see as the dominant trends or characteristics of faculty senators. The terms they used to identify these senate participants were largely interactive, indicating that they did see and notice interaction (and political behavior) among senators. The senate presidents seemed to be indicating that the forum of collegiality also has a dark side, where ambitious faculty members vie with each other for political ground. Perhaps the notion that Trow (1990) advanced about faculty senates not being an incubator for academic leadership is reflective of a time past. Has the current senate become divided between those with strong institutional patriotism and those with personal agendas for self-advancement? The terminology used by the senate presidents suggests that this may be the case, a concept perhaps reinforced by the high power ratings and correlations of the subgroup communications. At the very least, these findings do provide an impetus for continued exploration along this line of inquiry about the roles of ambition and patriotism in faculty involvement in governance.

The notion of a collective faculty voice articulated by a senate is not reflected in these findings, and perhaps should not be based on the concept of democratic decision-making. What does arise, though, is a vision of a group with fluid membership that can build coalitions and attempt to take power as it determines is necessary. As academic leaders attempt to utilize these faculty governance units for collaborative decision-making, it is subsequently imperative that they recognize the loosely structured body and the power of faculty to unite. For faculty, it is important to fully understand that separate actions and beliefs may be appropriate for floor debates, but even these differences must be foregone to advance the unit. Somewhere between these two uses of a faculty senate lies current practice.

References


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