Shared Governance, & the Faculty Senate

From the Faculty Convocation Address of Craig Thulin, August, 2018

I want to talk about Shared Governance; the governance of the University, but shared by whom? There are four stakeholder groups: faculty, administration, staff, and students. And I want to address the governance of the University that is shared by these four groups.

Last year I talked about how faculty is the heart of a university. I have not backed down on that. But some of what I said then needs to be tempered. I said that you could have – or at least could imagine – a university without administration or staff, but not a university without faculty. At one time in history, it was true that you not only *could* but even *did* have universities without much of a staff or specialized administration. Universities started with pretty much only faculty. But that was when the faculty taught that the sun was the center of the universe and that the king was divinely appointed by God.

Times have changed. Now universities have nine-figure budgets, thousands of employees, myriad state and federal laws and regulations to comply with, and they do more in addition to imparting academic knowledge. Though I still believe the faculty to be the heart, a modern university could not exist without an administration and a staff.

Yes, the staff needs to be included as well.

Staff are not ugly step children. We are a family. That does not mean that everyone in that family has equivalent roles; but it does mean that if anyone in the family feels mistreated, the whole family is the worse for it.

And there is a fourth group in this sharing, the students. The students are the center of it all. No, students shouldn’t rule the day. They are here to learn, not to rule. But they should be listened to, be given a seat at the table, be respected and offered the chance to make a difference. A university without a faculty doesn’t exist, and a university without an administration or staff wouldn’t be functional. But a university without students would have no *reason* to exist or to function. Students are the center of our mission, and that should be the center of our motivation.

The different stakeholders in shared governance – faculty, administration, staff, and students – do have different motivations. But we should all share the common motivation that is at the center of our mission: that of student success. If we cannot agree on that central motivation, then in truth we cannot work together. There is no “together” if there is no common goal, nothing that is a shared motivation.

The administration has the motivation of student success. I truly believe that. I acknowledge that they have other motivations as well. They want the University to work as an organization. They want it to tick. They want the budgets to balance and the regulations to be complied with and the taxpayers and donors to want to keep supporting us all. We hope that these other motivations never get in the way of their motivation of student success.

The faculty has the motivation of student success. I truly believe that. But I think that we should acknowledge that we also have other motivations as well. We want the university to be a bastion of intellectual activity, including our own intellectual activity. We want there to be debate and inquiry and unfettered pursuit of curiosity. We say that these other motivations could never get in the way of our motivation for student success, because that kind of intellectual environment *promotes* student success. But I believe that the truth is that we ***can*** get so caught up in the promotion of our own intellectual success and that of *some* of our students that we actually stand in the way of the success of other students.

To serve the motivation that we all should have in common – the motivation for student success – all of us as stakeholders need to truly *share* in the governance of the University.

“Share” doesn’t mean that we all equally share all things. Curriculum is the primary responsibility of the faculty; budget management is the primary responsibility of the administration, and so forth. But we all should share a voice and some responsibility in all of it.

It shouldn’t be ‘their governance as the administration that they share with the faculty’ or ‘our governance as the faculty that we share with the administration’. It should be owned by all of us and shared by all of us. It should be *our* governance as a cooperative that we all share with each other.\*[[1]](#footnote-1)\*

Faculty can be skeptical of administrators. We sometimes see administrators as so fixated on those other motivations – and on their own perceptions of what student success might mean – that they aren’t open to our perceptions of what student success means. And we can take offense when administrators lack the patience to try to work with us and instead try to accomplish governance of the university in ways that fall short of actually being shared.

And administrators can be skeptical of faculty. They sometimes see faculty that appear to be acting more out of self-interest than out of interest for the students and their success. And they sometimes see faculty not engaging in shared governance, sometimes being the least responsible people on a given committee or the least willing to try to make the University work as an organization, with budgets that balance and compliance with regulations. In fact, I have come to believe that perhaps the biggest threat to shared governance that I have seen is the unwillingness of some faculty to engage in it and try to work *with* administrators and staff, and the subsequent impatience of administrators and staff to be willing to work with faculty.

We have every right to be skeptical of each other in this shared governance arrangement. It is not only our right, it is our responsibility to be skeptical. Skepticism is critically important (and yes, there is a pun there). But as important as skepticism is, I don’t believe that cynicism is desirable or productive. It may not only be unhelpful, it may be harmful. Distrust and antagonism do not bring about shared governance, nor are they likely to bring about success.

We need to be appropriately skeptical of each other, but we need to be willing to work together for the shared governance of the institution and the achievement of our mutual goal of providing opportunity for our students to succeed.

So, what is the role of the Faculty Senate in all of this?

Well, what is the Faculty Senate for? I might venture to say that it is the role of the Faculty Senate to oppose the administration when it is infringing on faculty rights (or legitimate interests), and to work with the administration to advance the mission of the institution (and its legitimate interests).

But aren’t those contradictory – to oppose and to work with the same entity?

They are only contradictory if you neglect the qualifying phrases. So let me repeat myself – *with* the qualifying phrases.

The Faculty Senate is to oppose the administration when it is infringing on faculty rights (or legitimate interests), and to work with the administration to advance the mission of the institution (and its legitimate interests) – especially that of student success.

It’s like in any relationship with anyone you might interact with. You have to protect your own interests, but you want to work with them in order to advance the *mutual* interests. Either one of those at the expense of the other can be unhealthy.

There is a reason that you formed the relationship. If you insist on always putting your own interests ahead of the interests of the group, you are going to lose what that relationship could have facilitated, and what the group interests are. (And, of course, if you never stand up for yourself, you won’t be worth working with, and both you *and* the group will suffer.)

If you believe Shared Governance is adversarial and you treat it that way, so will the administration. The way to receive trust and cooperation is to give trust and cooperation.

This does not mean becoming a doormat. I think that there is value in the Russian proverb that was extensively used by Ronald Reagan: “Trust but verify”. Work together; with appropriate and healthy skepticism, but with a willingness to cooperate, to truly share governance.

Some may perceive what I am saying as heretical, as my having sold my soul to the enemy. But if we view the administration as the enemy, we will fall sadly short of our mission and our potential. You don’t achieve shared governance with an enemy.

There is another, shorter expression of what the Faculty Senate does: It represents the faculty. It represents the faculty in both opposing and working with the administration. The only way that it can effectively represent the faculty is to engage with the faculty – and that engagement is a two-way street (your Faculty Senator with you, and you with your Faculty Senator).

As an elected representative body, the Faculty Senate is the only legitimate collective voice of the faculty. Allow me to repeat that: the UVU Faculty Senate is the only legitimate collective voice of the UVU faculty.

The Faculty Senate means something. It *means* something to be a Senator (or at least it should).

Your Faculty Senator should be working hard to represent you. You as their constituents need to make sure that they are. And you need to contribute to your department electing willing and capable people to serve as Faculty Senators.

Service is certainly ***not*** just something for junior faculty members to help them get tenure. We need tenured folks – experienced folks – in the Faculty Senate and in other roles across campus. We all need to step up, from early on in our role as faculty through to and including the years as we become more seasoned.

The Faculty Senate has been working hard. The pace this past year has been fast and furious, but that is the challenge that we face. We are in a world of growing complexity, at a University whose growth brings complexity. And if we as the faculty aren’t up to fulfilling our role in shared governance, we may lose that role, one bit at a time.

Of course, we invite all faculty to work through the Faculty Senate whenever you have concerns.

But the Faculty Senate is not only about being a resource when you have concerns. It is about our part as the faculty in the shared governance of the University.

So. Have I sold out? Am I insufficiently faculty-centric? I would say that I *am* faculty-centric. I am centered on the faculty. I still believe that we are the heart of the University. But that heart and the body that it gives lifeblood to will succeed more if we work *with* – rather than only in opposition to – administration, staff, and students.

After all, we should all share the same mission: the success of the students. If being faculty-centric is about the success of the faculty *ahead* of that of the students, then count me out.

On the other hand, if what we are about is working together ***for*** the success of the students – working together with the administration, the staff, and the students themselves toward this goal – then count me in, way in, all the way in.

And I hope that we can count on you, too. Thank you.

1. \* Perhaps oversimplified. Utah State law and Regents Policy assign governance of the University to the President and the Board of Trustees, and they then share it with other stakeholders. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)