

# SHARED GOVERNANCE: OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES

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## ABSTRACT

*Shared governance in higher education is a global phenomenon. This 2018 literature review aims to document the history and progression of governance in higher education in the United States and the challenges and the opportunities of the shared governance to assist stakeholders of the higher education institutions in addressing shared governance challenges taking advantage of the opportunities to address those challenges. It is paramount that academic administrators and governing boards also known as board of directors by some higher education institutions gain the confidence and understanding, acceptance, and trust of the faculty, staff, students, and the external stakeholders. The recommendations and conclusions of this literature review may resolve some of the governance problems and challenges that higher education institutions are facing and help improve the governance of our institutions leading to good and productive results.*

**Keywords:** Governing boards, History of governing boards, Board of directors, Governance Conflicts, Academic administrators.

## INTRODUCTION

Consequential governance or distributed leadership that is popularly known as shared governance can be defined as shared leadership responsibility through deliberations, consultations, collaboration, and team work (AssocGovBoards, 2014b; Bejou & Bejou, 2016; Harris, 2009; Holt, Palmer, Gosper, Sankey, & & Allan, 2014; Pierce & Trachtenberg, 2014; Simplicio, 2006). The oldest higher education institution in the United States is Harvard College (now Harvard University) established in 1636 (Geiger, 2015) and the first community college in the United States is Joliet Junior College that started in 1901 (Bailey, Jaggars & Jenkins, 2015). Some authors observed an inconsistent naming of boards and how board members are called (examples, trustees and directors) among two-year institutions and four-year institutions, non-for-profit and for-profit institutions, and private and non-private institutions (Garrity, 2015; Pierce & Trachtenberg, 2014). Board of governors is popular among four-year institutions while board of directors is commonly used by the two-year institutions. To simplify and minimize confusion the author adopted governing boards, hereafter, in this article. For an efficient governance of the higher education academic institutions it is essential that board of governors, presidents, administrators, faculty, staff, and other stakeholders have a common understanding regarding the history and the evolution of the governance of higher education and the role of all parties (Cohen & Brawer, 2013; Pierce & Trachtenberg, 2014).

The early academic institutions in the United States started as private institutions (for-profit and not-for-profit) followed by public institutions and hybrid institutions (private and public institutions) emerged during the latter part of the 1900s (Garrity, 2015). The state governments have control over the public and not-for-profit academic institutions and the board

of governors have the ultimate authority in making the overall decisions and the management of the public and not-for-profit academic institutions (Garrity, 2015). The governing role of the board of governors is considered to have a legal authority and the faculty authority evolved over time because of the recognition of professionalism (Birnbaum, 2004). The concept of the shared governance has evolved to the point that some institutions have added the staff, students, and external stakeholders such as accrediting agencies, alumni, legislators, parents, and employers to the decision-making process (AssocGovBoards, 2014b; Bejou & Bejou, 2016; Clark, 2003; Cohen & Brawer, 2013) that is referred to as boundary crossing (Dawkins, 2011). The addition of segments of the higher education community to the board of governance as a later development have problems and challenges from the time it started (Heaney, 2010). Despite the challenges, the welcoming of new internal and external stakeholder members to governing boards create numerous opportunities such as collaborative student recruitment through modern collaborative marketing strategies and collaborative aggressive retention strategies that can lead to increased student enrollment and graduation rates (Bejou & Bejou, 2012; The White House, 2010, October 5). The democratic shared governance is unique of the United States' higher education governance (Heaney, 2010) that may be observed even at the departmental level and is critical for a healthy working environment that can lead to increased productivity of academic institutions (Eckel, 2000).

Initially, the recognition of the faculty to take part in the governance of higher education institutions was restricted to curriculum development and teaching that later was broadened to cover higher education related issues such as academic policy development, planning institutional activities, budgeting, and the selection of academic administrators and their evaluation (Birnbaum, 2004; Cohen & Brawer, 2013). Education of members of the academic community prior to making decisions, collaboration, and compromise are critical components of the shared governance process (Curnalia & Mermer, 2018; Pierce & Trachtenberg, 2014). The process uses the popular saying that two heads are better than one by tapping into the diverse talents that exist within and outside the institution. The article aims to document the history and progression of governance in higher education in the United States and the challenges and the opportunities of the shared governance to assist stakeholders of the higher education institutions in addressing shared governance challenges taking advantage of the opportunities to address those challenges. (Pierce & Trachtenberg, 2014).

## **HISTORY AND EVOLUTION OF BOARD OF GOVERNORS**

There is limited information regarding the history and chronological evolution of governing boards in the United States (Garrity, 2015). Governing boards emerged in the 1800s (Kerr & Gade, 1989) mainly because of limited professionals to fill the decision-making niche (Garrity, 2015). The governing of academic institutions before the 1800 was amorphous and unstructured (Kerr & Gade, 1989). The early academic institutions were under the control of Christian Churches and prior to the United States' Civil War, there was limited governance conflicts mainly because the faculty did not consider teaching as a permanent job that changed after the Civil War during the latter part of the 1800s (Pierce & Trachtenberg, 2014). The Morrill Act of 1862 that promoted land-grant higher institutions (e.g., agricultural colleges) (Duemer, 2007) and the GI Bill Serviceman's Readjustment Act of 1944 that supports veterans coupled with gigantic number of high school graduates were instrumental in revolutionizing United States' educational agenda (Cohen & Brawer, 2013; Levine & Levine, 2011).

The recognition of professionalism of the faculty and their involvement in the academic

decision-making process before 1900 was heavily restricted to teaching and the curriculum (Birnbaum, 2004). In the 1930s, according to AssocGovBoards, (2014a), governing boards were dominated by elderly males suggesting that males may have also dominated boards prior to the 1930s. In the 1930s, board meetings were mostly about financial contributions by the board members and the board chair mostly decides what is good for the institution (AssocGovBoards, 2014a). Later, during the mid-1900s, the academic revolution following World War II, the role of the faculty in the governing of higher education was broadened beyond just teaching and the curriculum to include academic related activities such as academic policy development, planning institutional activities, budgeting, and the selection of academic administrators and their evaluation (Birnbaum, 2004; Kerr & Gade, 1989). In the United States, high school administrators and local school boards, governing boards of the four-year institutions, and church related boards supervised the early two-year institutions in the 1900s and later by myriad governing boards (Cohen & Brawer, 2013; Pierce & Trachtenberg, 2014).

Between 1966-1967, the Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges (AGB), the American Council on Education (ACE), and the American Association of University Professors (AAUP), recognized and adopted a joint statement on governance of United States' colleges and universities that officially welcome the faculty's role in shared governance beyond teaching and the curriculum (Birnbaum, 2004; Cohen & Brawer, 2013; Pierce & Trachtenberg, 2014). During early 21<sup>st</sup> Century, the governance of academic institutions became myriad, vary among academic institutions, and may include the faculty, staff, students, and external stakeholders (AssocGovBoards, 2014b; Bejou & Bejou, 2016; Clark, 2003). The addition of members of the academic institutions and external stakeholders to the board of governance in the administration of higher institutions as a later development had problems from the time it started (Heaney, 2010). The welcoming of diverse groups of people to the governance of higher education institutions in addition to high demand of distance education curriculum and maximum use of technology in delivery of the distance education, hybrid (distance education and face-to-face meetings combined), and the traditional face-to-face modalities, the state government performance funding accountabilities, and internal and external higher education collaborations have changed the mission of higher education and added several layers to the primary mission of accumulation and contributing to the global knowledge to the benefit of all citizens in diverse ways (Bejou & Bejou, 2016; The White House, 2010, October 5). Consequently, the higher education administrators and governing boards must embrace and use new creative strategies in governing their institutions to move them forward (Bejou & Bejou, 2012; Bouwer, Koster, & Bergh, 2018; Cohen & Brawer, 2013; The White House, 2010, October 5).

## REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Shared governance in higher education is a global issue (Kayyal & Gibbs, 2012; Kováts, Heidrich, & Chandler, 2017; Pierce & Trachtenberg, 2014) and the understanding of shared governance vary among higher education institutions (Heaney, 2010). The shared governance creates the opportunity to educate students that are able to perform their civic duties, fit into the workforce, contribute to the socio-economic growth of their country, provides an excellent working environment for all, promotes interpersonal relationships leading to trusting one another, and promotes multiculturalism that can lead to high productivity of the institution (Bejou & Bejou, 2016; Lencioni, 2002). Across the United States, conflicts continue to exist between the faculty, academic administrators, and the board of governance (Harris, 2009; Holt, Palmer, Gosper, Sankey & Allan, 2014; Pierce & Trachtenberg, 2014). Conflicts that arise

because of shared governance ranked second to tenure track conflicts in institutions of higher education (Tierney & Holley, 2005). Most of higher education governance disagreements are due to minimal or no involvement of the faculty in the decision-making processes and how rapid the activities are communicated and implemented (Pierce & Trachtenberg, 2014) that may directly or indirectly relate to teaching and the curriculum (Buhrman, 2015; Kayyal & Gibbs, 2012). Taking some time to inform the academic community and less rapid implementation of changes work better and lessen conflicts compared to rapid changes (Clark, 2003). In some academic institutions, the conflicts result in a vote of no confidence in the president and/or the board of governance (Pierce & Trachtenberg, 2014). Presidents of higher education institutions face a tough challenge of serving as a critical bridge between their internal customers (faculty, staff, and students) and the board of governance (Cohen & Brawer, 2013; Pierce & Trachtenberg, 2014).

The question of who has the authority and responsibility in making a particular decision have been reported to create tension in the higher education even in the role model academic institutions (Heaney, 2010). The problems that our faculty, the academic administrators, and the board of governors are having may partly be due to gray areas of the decision-making process that has been observed in the community colleges, the four-year institutions, and universities (Jensen, 2001; Kater, 2017; Simplicio, 2006). Common understanding, fairness, and collaboration are important pieces of a successful shared governance (Heaney, 2010) in order not to lose faculty talents, expertise, and professionalism in the decision-making process (Curnalia & Mermer, 2018).

Sometimes, higher education administrators make decisions solely on financial constraints that are mostly directed to academic departments (Pierce & Trachtenberg, 2014) that may be due to state funding cuts and low tuition revenue due to low student enrollments (Klein, 2015; Umbricht, Fernandez & Ortagus, 2017) with no regard to how student learning and retention will be impacted (Birnbaum, 2004; Thoenig & Paradeise, 2014). Some faculty also have a problem with how quickly those decisions are implemented (Pierce & Trachtenberg, 2014) while some academic administrators and board of governors see the faculty involvement as a hindrance to making quick and timely decisions (Birnbaum, 2004).

Rigid and walled higher education governance limits innovation and productivity (Cohen & Brawer, 2013; Kayyal & Gibbs, 2012). Collectively, the faculty have the expertise in curriculum development and innovative teaching methods/ techniques to foster student learning and retention (Buhrman, 2015; Kayyal & Gibbs, 2012). However, research studies showed that some academic administrators impose decisions on faculty without any consultation that creates toxic working environments with unintended consequence (Eckel, 2000; Kayyal & Gibbs, 2012). Some of the unintended consequences are inability to attract highly qualified faculty to the institution, low quality teaching, and reduced student learning that may lead to graduating students that may not fit well into the workforce (Eckel, 2000). It is estimated that the United States will need more than 10 million employable skilled workers in the next decade (LeBlanc, 2015, April 10; The White House, 2010, October 5). However, the United States employers do not think that United States' academic institutions can graduate the needed workers with fitting job skills necessary to enable the country to compete in the global market (LeBlanc, 2015, April 10).

Some authors documented the need for the faculty to take the leading role for starting new programs, termination of struggling programs, and forming degree requirements based on local needs, labor market data, and current industry needs through statewide and local

instruments (Buhrman, 2015; Clark, 2003; Heaney, 2010). Contrarily, some academic administrators and board of governors make curriculum decisions unilaterally that can draw criticisms especially from the faculty (Pierce & Trachtenberg, 2014; Simplicio, 2006). When the faculty is actively involved the decision-making process and the faculty make the recommendations to the academic administrators and board of governors it removes management conflicts and roadblocks (Clark, 2003; Harris, 2009).

Academic conflicts between the faculty and academic administrators and governing boards regarding salary and budget issues have been observed across the country (Birnbaum, 2004). Departmental budget cuts leading to limited resources for faculty duties, limited budget for faculty professional development, and making decisions to layoff some faculty and/ or not to fill positions of faculty retirees often result in increasing the class size that increases the work load for the faculty at the same salary rate (Kater, 2017). Interestingly, students take into consideration class sizes when choosing classes because they have positive perception for small class sizes (Chapman & Ludlow, 2010). Large class sizes have been documented to minimize student faculty interaction with negative consequences such as reduced student learning and low student retention (Chapman & Ludlow, 2010; Queen, 2017).

Although United States academic institutions have more than 60% of contingent faculty also known part-time faculty and adjunct faculty, the contingent faculty do not have voting rights that some members of the academic community think should be addressed (Holt, Palmer, Gosper, Sankey & Allan, 2014; Pierce & Trachtenberg, 2014; Simplicio, 2006). Institutional effectiveness can be enhanced by faculty participation in shared governance (Birnbaum, 2004) and the opportunity can be weakened by undemocratic practices (Heaney, 2010). The shared governance process must respect institutional values, social norms, and traditions (Birnbaum, 2004; Kater, 2017) and clarity of individual roles and steps in the decision-making process is necessary (Birnbaum, 2004; Kater, 2017; Simplicio, 2006). Involving the entire community of an institution, not just the faculty creates an opportunity and opens doors that can promote achieving good results (Cohen & Brawer, 2013; Dawkins, 2011; Tierney & Holley, 2005).

The role of board of governance and shared governance in higher education and governance challenges has been documented world-wide (Chuprikova, 2016; Curnalia & Mermer, 2018; Kayyal & Gibbs, 2012; Pierce & Trachtenberg, 2014). Unfortunately, the understanding of shared governance vary among higher education institutions (Heaney, 2010). The understanding of shared governance and its history and evolution is critical for a smooth administration of higher education institutions (Pierce & Trachtenberg, 2014) that can lead to increased productivity of higher education institutions (Eckel, 2000). During the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, the faculty, staff, students, and external stakeholders take part in the decision-making process and governance of higher education institutions (AssocGovBoards, 2014b; Birnbaum, 2004; Clark, 2003). However, the board of governors have the legal ultimate authority in making the overall decisions in the United States especially in the four-year institutions and universities (Garrity, 2015).

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

In this section, I documented some recommendations that may resolve some of the conflicts that exist at academic institutions by harnessing the opportunities created by the shared governance:

1. The academic administrators and board of governors must try and increase the involvement of the faculty and other internal and external stakeholders in the decision-making process because there is evidence that when people are involved in developing a plan, it creates a sense of belonging, ownership, and commitment that minimizes conflict and increases the willingness of individuals to contribute their talents to accomplish the task (Clark, 2003; Cohen & Brawer, 2013; Heaney, 2010; Lencioni, 2002). The above can be achieved by using existing committees and forming additional ad-hoc committees if necessary for input of ideas to arrive at important decisions that may directly or indirectly affect each stakeholder. The outcome of those committee meetings should not be just an academic exercise, rather the academic administrators and board of governors must listen to all the stakeholders and use the information gathered to drive their decisions. Additionally, conflicts create unhealthy toxic working environment that can lead to decreased student enrollment and attraction of good and dedicated faculty and staff (DeCew, 2002; Kayyal & Gibbs, 2012). Furthermore, the involvement of all stakeholders in a decision-making process creates a happy family willing to work together creating an opportunity to achieve valuable results such as low faculty turn-over rates that is beneficial for the college in diverse ways and high productivity across the institution (Clark, 2003; Curnalia & Mermer, 2018; Heaney, 2010).
2. All the stakeholders in the decision-making process must be brought together to continually revise higher education decision-making processes to remove gray areas that can cause confusion and lead to conflicts (Kater, 2017; Simplicio, 2006). It is apparent that those gray areas in the governance decision making process is one of the main reasons why academic institutions are having conflicts. The academic administrators and board of governors must be open and willing to solicitate and consider diverse views on a proposed activity before its implementation (Pierce & Trachtenberg, 2014; Wheeler, 2012). Diverse views coupled with the energy that go with it enriches educational experience for all and is one of the critical drivers for developing a successful higher education institution. It is also important that academic administrators and governing boards be aware that governing boards continue to evolve and stop using one-tool-fit-all model (Bejou & Bejou, 2016).
3. Our academic administrators and board of director must have a clear vision and mission (Pierce & Trachtenberg, 2014; Wheeler, 2012) and not what can be described as diffused vision and mission regarding the role of the faculty and their impact on student learning, success, retention, and graduation. It is paramount that academic administrators and board of governors allow the professionals to take the leading role in starting new programs, termination of struggling programs, and forming degree requirements through statewide and local instruments. Additionally, it is critical that the academic administrators, the board of governors, and the members of the academic community unite and find unique and innovative ways to deliver student-centered curriculum to fuel the growth of higher education institutions and the economy of our country (Kayyal & Gibbs, 2012; Pierce & Trachtenberg, 2014; The White House, 2010, October 5). The above is possible if internal and external stakeholders are willing to harness the synergy created by diversity and compromise in finding common grounds, work as a team, and collaborate.
4. The academic administrators and the board of governors must be transparent and clear regarding their intentions (Bejou & Bejou, 2016; Kater, 2017; Pierce & Trachtenberg, 2014) and make information available for review by all stakeholders so that they are well informed before coming to the participatory decision-making table that is currently happening on limited basis in some academic institutions (Heaney, 2010). The academic administrators and the governing boards must try and eliminate what the faculty consider deliberate last minute high speed decision-making process in order to prevent their involvement in the process (Heaney, 2010).
5. Faculty position eliminations and decisions not to fill existing positions must be data driven and communicated in a way to minimize disagreements and conflicts because faculty position eliminations can lead to increase in the work load for the faculty. Some authors recommend small class sizes (e.g., faculty ratio of not more than 20:1 for writing and developmental education classes) because large class sizes minimize student faculty interaction with negative consequences such as reduced student learning and low student retention (Chapman & Ludlow, 2010; Queen, 2017). Compromises on class sizes using data can be discussed and agreed upon by faculty involvement that may remove conflicts. It has been documented that students take into consideration class sizes when choosing classes that may contribute to low student enrollments (Chapman & Ludlow, 2010).
6. The academic administrators and board of governors must find ways to reward those that they supervise because the recognition of faculty achievement through rewards and/ or awards that can be accomplished in diverse ways increase faculty and staff morale. One of those rewards is professional development

opportunities for the faculty to be current on academic issues. Tangible and intangible incentives positively affect intrinsic motivation and extrinsic motivation of workers. It is very important that we deliver quality education to our students through frequent institutional assessment and commitment to professional development to our employees through shared governance (Clark, 2003; Thoenig & Paradeise, 2014). For example, assessment instruments that some faculty have negative perception about can be used by the faculty as a tool for faculty governance (Buhrman, 2015).

## CONCLUSIONS

Shared governance creates the opportunity to educate students that are able to perform their civic duties, fit into the workforce, contribute to the socio-economic growth of their country, provides an excellent working environment for all, promotes interpersonal relationships leading to trusting one another, and promotes multiculturalism that can lead to high productivity of an academic institution (Bejou & Bejou, 2016; Lencioni, 2002). Giving the ultimate authority and the overall decision-making to the governing boards over other stakeholders can make some governing boards to make unilateral decisions that may lead to conflicts (Pierce & Trachtenberg, 2014; Tierney & Holley, 2005). Consequently, conflicts that arise because of shared governance ranked second to tenure track conflicts in higher education institutions in the United States (Tierney & Holley, 2005). The governance challenges and conflicts that United States' higher education institutions are facing may be lessened if governing boards fulfill advisory roles instead of having the ultimate decision-making authority. The board of governance's playing a facilitator role does not mean that they no longer have authority rather it reinforces their positions as the legal authority in the governance process.

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