

Shared Governance?

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The founding administrators and faculty at Stockton began collegiate political life full of idealism and optimism. We would work together in good spirit without the usual forms of interest politics—faculty, students, administrators, unions and management. In the first year, the faculty rejected the initial invitation of the “mild” association, the New Jersey Education Association (NJEA), to be our representative in contract negotiations: We didn’t need a union; we would work it out ourselves. A year later we joined the more radical union, the American Federation of Teachers (AFT). What happened?

This essay endeavors to answer this question by looking at the history of governance at Stockton from the faculty’s perspective. It focuses on changes in governance and the reasons for these changes rather than on the substantive matters taken up by the different governance structures.

THE CONTEXT

Stockton began its life at a time of an extraordinary convergence of political factors. It was a time of rich external and internal political culture for a college to begin its efforts to fashion collegiate governance. The larger culture of the late Sixties was marked by the strong anti-authoritarian drive of the student generation and the caution, and even fear, of those “in charge.” Many younger members of the culture wished to minimize any hierarchy of authority. Other members of the culture feared the excesses of these egalitarians and were concerned with control and accountability. Stockton had representatives of both subcultures.

At the same time, the American Association of University Professors (AAUP) had just completed a landmark national study of collegiate decision-making in which they suggested that there were times for faculty autonomy in decision-making, times for faculty/administrative partnership, and times when the faculty had lesser roles. This model was at odds with the beginning structure of governance at Stockton and provided some of the fuel for early disputes over governance. The senior administration had put in place (top-down) the governance structure that the faculty inherited. In other words, to the question “Who decides who decides?” the answer was “the administration.” The initial model of governance at Stockton made no allowance for a distinctive faculty voice in governance. Still another cultural factor was brought into Stockton—consensus decision-making. Some faculty and administrators had studied its efficacy, and several faculty members were practitioners in this Quaker tradition. Others thought consensus decision-making was inefficient and downright foolish.

Finally, Stockton existed in the state of New Jersey, which was heavily unionized and had statewide coordination. Both of these external units limited the autonomy of Stockton and therefore played a role in internal governance. It was in this political culture that the Stockton founders established Stockton’s system of governance.

CORPORATE GOVERNANCE: THE EARLY YEARS

Administrative Working Paper #1 was initially seen by most faculty and administrators as a master stroke of design. It was clear that the early planners thought governance was fundamental to the effective operation of the college. The early planners crafted a design for unitary (corporate) governance centering on the College Council. The College Council was to serve as the principal governing council with Collegia (described below) providing smaller political/social groups. Throughout those early years, the official documents clearly asserted the authority of the president and the Board of Trustees as the legal, accountable authority. Those same documents also resisted the normally constituted authorities of faculty and students as distinct interest groups.

The College Council had broad authority to deal with matters of instruction, co-curriculum, advisement/information, personnel, finance, and campus planning. It met monthly and was made up of ten students, ten faculty, and ten staff (seven from unclassified staff and three from classified staff). The selection of members was a random drawing from among those willing to serve one-year terms and limited to two consecutive terms. The intent was to create a group that felt minimum constituent responsibility but maximum college responsibility. The emphasis throughout was to perform an advisory role to the president and the board and not to presume to have decision-making authority. The College Council was to be a substitute for the traditional interest groups (faculty and students).

The planners resisted the traditional governance groups of faculty and students (senates or assemblies). This lack of special structure discouraged the leadership that normally is represented through these traditional groups. Also, the absence of departments and the chairs normally associated with departments further reduced the natural faculty leadership associated with departments. In most colleges, the “layer” of departmental chairs provides a check on the concentration of power in the senior administration. Stockton’s program coordinators, who rotated every year or two, were not the equivalent.

Almost immediately, these “natural” groups began to assert

themselves. By April of the first year the faculty began to call its own meetings with a "moderator" (the Quaker term) to "facilitate" the meetings. (Up to that time the faculty meetings were called and chaired by the Academic Vice President.) For the next three years the faculty met under its own authority, formally constituting itself as the Faculty Assembly during the fourth year of the College. The Assembly was not recognized by the administration for several more years.

During this same half-decade, the College Council continued to function but was losing legitimacy as the "representatives" were not elected, and their action was only advisory. The difficulties were well documented in the papers leading up to the first accreditation visit.

On another front, late in the first year, the faculty formed the Stockton Federation of Teachers (SFT), a unit of the larger AFT. Many felt that the "heavy hand" of the president motivated the faculty to join the more radical union. Although the union was not formally a part of the institutional system of governance, it did deal with important issues affecting institutional well being and also unified the faculty during contract negotiations. The union was one place in which the distinctive faculty leadership was identified and developed. Meetings of the SFT were an important setting in which faculty felt some political unity as a faculty. This unity no doubt added to the desire for a more distinct faculty voice in the college through the Faculty Assembly. The students followed the faculty's lead and in the second year formed their own "union." After a few years, the union structure was abandoned by the students and a more traditional student government association was formed.

A couple of additional observations need to be made on the political culture of those earliest years. As regards the curriculum, as distinct from college-wide matters, the individual faculty members had extraordinary autonomy and valued that autonomy. Faculty members engaged in conversations with their colleagues about their courses but resisted any attempts to form a curriculum committee. Put otherwise, the faculty rejected any attempt to place some faculty over others in these individual decisions. So at one level, the faculty had little distinctive collective authority, while at another level they had nearly complete individual autonomy.

Another distinctive feature of Stockton's beginning was the presence of the Preceptorial and the Collegium. The Preceptorial was made up of a preceptor (advisor/teacher) and fifteen students with whom the preceptor worked for four years, helping each student to fashion a good education. The Collegium was made up of six preceptors, five of whom were faculty members from different disciplines and one who was an administrator. The result was ninety-person groups that promised to be foundational to governance. Faculty members were assigned office locations based upon their Collegium, making the sense of "neighborhood" more salient. However, Stockton's initial

culture of anti-authoritarianism made the groups resistant to the rise of leadership (in which students dominated), and therefore the Collegia did not emerge as a significant factor in governance. Also the Preceptorial structure collapsed under its own weight, thereby removing the building block for "neighborhood" governance—but that's another story.

Students also played a substantial role in the evaluation of faculty during the college's first decade. They both *reported* on teaching by filling out a teacher evaluation form for all classes and *judged* that teaching by sitting in equal numbers to faculty on the divisional review committees. The review committees were the first group to consider faculty members' retention, tenure, and promotion. With a tenure quota of fifty percent in place for programs during this time, these committees had real power. The votes were cast anonymously, thereby giving the student vote equal standing with the faculty vote. This element of governance was at odds with standard practice in higher education and caused considerable consternation among many faculty members who felt that faculty alone should be making these personnel recommendations. (Egalitarianism had its limits!)

In preparation for the first accreditation visit, a document was written evaluating the success of these early structures. In short, the report was critical of the "centralized authority" of the president and the weakness of the College Council. The 1975 report of the Commission of Higher Education of the Middle States Association was also critical of the functioning of the governance system and suggested a reexamination of it. It was in this context that more traditional forms of governance emerged.

FEDERATED GOVERNANCE: THE FACULTY ASSEMBLY, DEANS TO CHAIRS, AND THE STUDENT UNION TO THE STUDENT GOVERNMENT ASSOCIATION

In June 1975, the faculty ratified a constitution forming the Faculty Assembly. Almost immediately, Ralph Bean, the first union president wrote a memo to Fred Mench, the first Assembly president, outlining the role of the union as distinct from the Faculty Assembly. Because the membership of the union and the Assembly overlapped almost completely, it was relatively easy to come to an understanding of the role of each. Put simply, the union would attend to working conditions, the adherence to the contract, and the fair treatment of faculty. The Assembly would deal with academic policy, programs, General Studies, and issues of institutional well-being and planning. This "division of labor" has worked well over the first forty years, although sometimes administrators have complained that they don't always know to whom they are talking—faculty as Faculty Assembly members or faculty as union members.

By 1980, significant changes were underway in the governance structure of the College. The first president, Richard Bjork, had moved to a position in Vermont, and Peter Mitchell had assumed the position. The internal report on governance evaluated the strengths and weaknesses of the first decade's governance structures and functions and concluded that a move to more

recognition of faculty and student structures would improve the genuine sharing of decision-making. The new president seemed attuned to the traditional forms of governance and embraced the efforts underway to make legitimate the distinct voice of the faculty. The Faculty Assembly was recognized in the college's publications, and regular meetings of the faculty leadership and the president occurred.

A notable step, taken by the new president, was to call together a group of senior faculty to work with him in the restructuring of Academic Affairs. The result of these deliberations was to replace deans with faculty-elected and administratively appointed chairs of the academic divisions. This change placed senior faculty in an administrative role, much like the departmental chairs at major universities. This change, as well as the governance process by which the change was decided, further enhanced the perception of the faculty as partners with the administration.

The Faculty Assembly was now operating with full legitimacy. It clearly did not always "win the day" but was taken seriously by the president and the Board of Trustees. The Assembly, made up of the entire faculty and some academic administrators, met monthly. A Steering Committee served as an executive group and provided "steerage" of issues to the appropriate Assembly committees.

Evidence of the "standing" of the Faculty Assembly was found in the role it played in the presidential search resulting in the Peter Mitchell appointment. The Assembly president and one additional faculty member elected by the Assembly were the two faculty members serving on the Board of Trustees' search committee. Additionally, a major change in the structure of the General Studies curriculum was proposed by an Assembly committee and approved by the administration. The faculty had the clear sense that the administration respected the judgment of the collective faculty.

At the same time, costs were already beginning to be apparent in the "town meeting" approach to faculty governance. In the conduct of normal business, the process of governing was slow. A committee had to consider practically all matters and usually met only once or twice a month. Then the entire faculty met to consider the committee's recommendations. Sometimes a quorum was not obtained, and delays occurred. Finally, increasing numbers of committees were generated, resulting in additional costs of time.

Even with the inefficiencies, the faculty preferred the Assembly to the former College Council as the way of giving expression to the faculty's concerns. The Assembly functioned best when the College faced an important institutional concern. At those times, the faculty would come out in full strength, and their decisions had real weight.

Under the third president, Vera Farris, the chairs were replaced by deans so as to produce a "management confidential" layer of

administrative officers. The next two decades were marked by a more traditional gap between the administration and the faculty. Many important initiatives happened during these years, but the governing relationship between the faculty and administration was more adversarial than collegial. Despite this relationship, business was conducted with reasonable effectiveness. Two examples give evidence of the mixed effectiveness of the Assembly structure: the Freshman Seminar program and plus-minus grading.

The Chair of the General Studies Committee and the new Dean of General Studies co-sponsored an idea for freshman seminars. The idea was taken to the Assembly, discussed for several meetings, and then approved. The administration was also included in the discussions from the beginning. A distinctive faculty voice coupled with an administrative/faculty partnership prevailed in this adoption.

Another idea, brought forward by a couple of faculty members, was plus-minus grading. The faculty was split on the matter, but after nearly a half year of conversation, the Assembly approved the change. The president resisted the idea, taking it to the Student Senate. She reported that the senate was concerned with a possible deflationary effect of plus-minus grading. She refused to approve the Assembly recommendation until the students also agreed. Faculty felt that grading was the prerogative of faculty and thought it an act of bad faith by the administration.

In the mid-eighties, the Faculty Assembly leadership constituted a task force to revise the constitution with an eye to making it easier for the administration to work cooperatively with the faculty and to realize some efficiencies internal to the assembly. The administration had stated that it often by-passed the Assembly because it wasn't clear to whom proposals should go, and the pace of consideration was too slow.

The constitutional changes created a clear committee to correspond to each of the vice-presidential units with additional committees in Academic Affairs. This structure acknowledged the legitimate concern of the faculty for any issues that affected the welfare of the College, while acknowledging a primary concern for academic matters. The Steering Committee was given more power of substantive review to expedite discussions by the full Assembly. These changes seemed to improve matters.

By the end of the eighties, governance was functioning only modestly well. The Assembly would take action, sometimes finding support and sometimes not. Communication with the administration was conducted frequently after the fact and was often combative. The Assembly seemed to be seen by some key administrators as a hurdle to be avoided on the big issues of planning and the nature of the College. Alternatively, the president used faculty/administrative task forces of her own creation to handle many matters of concern. The Faculty Assembly considered this approach to be a by-pass of the

legitimate structure of governance.

The Middle States Report of 1990 ended with a note suggestive of the state of governance at that time:

One final word of wisdom? Perhaps the key phrase should be "shared vision, shared governance." Stockton has many admirable and unique accomplishments and many excellent and foresighted objectives for its future. At this time, however, the Study Team has missed the sense of an integrated planning process that takes the academic and educational process as its centerpiece. We would close by encouraging the President, who had already made remarkable progress at Stockton; the faculty, which is exceptional for its creativity and loyalty to the institution; and the College's many able administrators to fully integrate its planning process into the ongoing life of the College.

In response to the conditions of that time, acknowledged by the Middle States Report, a group of former moderators/presidents wrote an extended paper on the state of governance and planning at Stockton—"As We See It." It was critical of governance in general and planning in particular as not being at all collaborative and open.

As the College continued to admit more students and hire more faculty, the inefficiencies of the town meeting form of governance was becoming increasingly evident.

REPRESENTATIVE GOVERNANCE: THE FACULTY SENATE

In 2008, the Faculty Assembly approved the creation of a special task force on governance. It was charged with considering alternate forms of governance in an effort to improve the faculty's contribution to the conduct of the College. The charge included the serious consideration of a Faculty Senate. The Assembly, in the past, had considered and rejected the idea of a senate. However, the time seemed right.

The task force, based upon its further deliberation and conversations with colleagues, fleshed out a detailed proposal for a senate in constitutional language. In broad strokes, we proposed a senate larger than the current Steering Committee but smaller than the entire faculty (roughly one tenth of faculty members, about thirty currently). We proposed to preserve the full faculty meeting (Faculty Assembly), which would occur at least once a semester, or more frequently as called by the senate. The faculty would retain the power to override senate decisions and initiate actions not brought up by the senate and could call itself into session with the signatures of a certain percentage of the faculty.

The attempt was to gain the advantages of a smaller group for operational purposes, while retaining the political "weight" of the full faculty when needed. We saw several advantages of a senate over a town meeting of the faculty:

1. Clearly, a smaller body could more effectively deliberate on routine matters that do not warrant the full faculty's attention.

2. By design, a senate would also better ensure the type of constancy and continuity that generally underlie effective shared governance than would a town meeting with inconstant attendance.

3. One's participation in the senate would be clearly recognized in a way not typical in a large town meeting.

4. The demands upon any one faculty member to be heavily involved in governance would be less as one finished a term of service and yielded to colleagues to take their turn. (As one colleague put it years ago, "I would serve a term or two on a senate, but I don't want to waste my time attending these amorphous Assembly meetings.")

5. A representative body elected by the whole would be a better representative of the whole than a poorly attended meeting of the whole.

6. By maintaining the sovereignty of the collective faculty (its capacity to override the senate in extraordinary circumstances), the senate would be held accountable to the entire faculty.

7. And finally, although a structural change cannot remove the cultural problem of faculty disengagement or distraction by other demands, it promised to make that disengagement less damaging to the College. A group of faculty dedicated to the notion of shared governance may be adequate.

The effectiveness of the senate is currently being reviewed. It appears to have been a needed change in governance.

LESSONS AND QUESTIONS

What does Stockton's experience in governance teach us and what questions does it raise? Stockton had tried unitary governance with its College Council, federated governance of the whole with the Faculty Assembly and federated governance using a representative body—the Faculty Senate. Stockton had tried consensus decision-making and found it wanting. Stockton has experienced periods of genuine shared governance and times of separations and suspicion. These forms and experiences reflect the efforts of collegiate governance across the country as well as at Stockton.

We have learned some lessons and are left with some questions.

1. We have learned that governance is fundamental to the well being of a college. The question of who is involved with various types of decision is vital to good decisions and good morale. It is also important as to "who decides who decides."
2. Administrators prefer a manageable partner of reasonable size and reliable membership. If the cast of characters is too large and variable over time, a good working partnership is hard to form.
3. "Traditional forms" of any practice, and certainly governance, are usually traditional because they work. When one deviates from standard practice it takes a great deal of human energy to sustain the new practice.
4. Distinct bodies (faculty, students, and administrators) want to have their distinct perspectives given voice. It's not satisfactory to amalgamate the voices into one. Further, choosing representatives by random selection, although appealing in concept, troubles constituents and cripples the development

of constituent leadership.

5. Faculty bodies, like assemblies or senates, can work effectively with faculty unions if the will is present.
6. Similarly, if good people operate with good will, virtually any structure can be made to work. However certain structures are more conducive to good working relations than others. Structure does affect function!
7. Consensus decision-making may require a culture of consensus. A Quaker college, like Earlham College, can make consensus governance work with ease, while a college like Stockton, with its different culture, finds it difficult and even unsatisfactory, except in small councils.

These are some of the lessons we have drawn from our efforts in governance. We are left with some questions as well:

1. Could the unitary governance (the College Council) have worked with a different cast of characters in a different time? With a less authoritarian president, a faculty that was more accepting of the necessity for significant accountability to external audiences, and in a time when faculty and students were less inclined to test limits, perhaps the College Council could have worked. Perhaps, if the council was made up of elected representatives who therefore had political legitimacy, it would have had a better chance.
2. Will the operation of the Faculty Senate, as a subset of the entire faculty, create a further sense of alienation in the rest of the faculty? Can the senate structure gain the efficiencies of a small manageable governing body while creating a sense of involvement and responsibility in the faculty as a whole?
3. Will a senate, with its implication of the involvement of senior faculty, be true to its name? Will long-term faculty step up?

It is my humble opinion that the governance that has evolved at Stockton after forty years will be effective. The current governance structure acknowledges the legitimate interests and perspectives of interest groups through its separate bodies, while moving in the direction of greater collaboration among the bodies. The structure seems right, but its effectiveness will ultimately depend upon the good will of the players.

A Rainbow-colored Sign

From the first of my day-long interviews in WQ 201, I knew this was the right place for me. I felt very much at-home with several of the people who interviewed me that day, noticing the kind of jewelry the women wore (Beth Olsen was wearing some Bakelite, Claire Lopatto and GT Lenard had on earrings like the ones I make), and even enjoying the kinds of questions I was asked (not the usual "Where do you see yourself five years from now?"). By the end of the day, when I was interviewed by my boss-to-be, David Carr, I was exhausted. I made mistakes in my responses and could barely sit up straight. But somehow, I got that "good vibe" from David, thinking he might be a good boss, and that he might think I was the best candidate for the position.

That was in the summer of 2002. That was the summer my mom lay in a coma in an Arizona hospital after suffering a burst brain aneurysm several months earlier. I made three trips to Phoenix that summer: the first to see if there was any brain activity left in her; the second to be with my sister, brother and stepfather at her bedside when they removed her from the ventilator; and the third to come back with my son, Nick, to participate in her memorial service. During the second trip, the morning after my mom died, I got an early morning (Phoenix time) phone call from David Carr offering me the job. I asked if I could have a few days to talk to my husband and make a decision, but David needed an answer within 24 hours for the imminent Board meeting. Jeez, I thought, my mom just died and I have to make a life-changing decision! Then I focused back on the way I felt during my day on campus, and knew at once what my answer would be.

My first day driving to Stockton – we lived in the Trenton area at the time – I found a new route that seemed most direct, rte. 539. I was nervous, starting a new job, and still grieving over my mom's death.

As I drove the hour and a half trip, I thought that it was almost magical that I got the job offer just after my mom died, as if she had a hand in making it happen for me. I get mystical in my beliefs during emotional times, but am usually more of a non-believer.

As I got to within about 10 miles of the Garden State Parkway on 539, I saw a large, rainbow-colored sign for a truck company, Phoenix. And then I smiled to myself. My mom was reassuring me that yes, in fact, she was accompanying me on the trip to Stockton, where she knew I would be happy.

Deb Dagavarian
