

# **Faculty Governance at Urban Institutions: A Metropolitan Comparison**

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## **Abstract**

*Metropolitan campuses with urban missions encourage the development of programs and curriculum whereby faculty are essential for achievement. Yet, the role of faculty in governance at urban institutions is rarely discussed. Based on a national comparison of four-year institutions, this article examines faculty governance at metropolitan universities. Findings show that faculty at metropolitan universities report slightly lower levels of influence over decision-making and lower levels of participation in governance. Challenges and opportunities for improvement are also discussed.*

Any observer of higher education will testify to the complex and dynamic environment surrounding colleges and universities. One might also be quick to point out the differences or unique circumstances that exist for private institutions versus those that are public; or, in this case, those that operate in metropolises across the US. In a world of ever-changing priorities and fluid contexts, higher education leaders are forced to consider their surroundings for opportunities and potential threats.

In higher education, the issue of institutional effectiveness has become increasingly important to state legislatures, donors, and campus leaders (Tierney 1999). Fluctuating fiscal resources, market competition, and efforts to improve quality each lend themselves to concerns of effective governance. In general terms, these concerns derive from two essential questions: (1) who should decide on key university issues? and (2) how should decisions be made? The answers to these questions have serious consequences for institutional performance and vitality (Hirsch 2001).

The importance of academic governance for successfully managing colleges and universities is among the few issues higher education scholars and practitioners agree on (AGB 1996; Duderstadt 2001; Burgan 1998). At the same time, a high level of concern is expressed about the adequacy of current governance systems given the context of higher education. Longin (2002) claims that “when it comes to providing first-rate higher education in a rapidly changing socioeconomic environment, current governance structures and processes are obstacles to informed, thoughtful, effective, and timely decision-making about issues... critical to the future of the institution.”

Academic governance is often conceived with at least three main constituents in mind: governing boards, university presidents, and faculty. Of these three, the role faculty

play in campus decision making is the most obscure and variable, creating a constant quandary for many campuses. Overall, faculty express dissatisfaction with decision-making processes and they are critical of how serious their input is taken by administrators (Tierney and Minor 2003). Meanwhile, administrators display impatience with governance structures that are untimely and ineffective. Somewhere in the middle are campuses where all constituents recognize the importance of shared governance but struggle to find effective ways to create inclusive processes while maintaining institutional responsiveness.

Adding to the challenge, many universities now engage in academic endeavors intended to generate revenue that creates new areas of decision-making (Eckel 2003; Slaughter and Leslie 1997). Metropolitan or urban institutions are noted for operating in more culturally and economically dynamic environments. How does the concept or practice of faculty governance differ in these institutions from those that operate in non-metropolitan environments? Faculty involvement in decision-making is often taken for granted as a staple in university governance. Yet, the operation of faculty governance is the source of contention and confusion for many campuses. Furthermore, there is little understanding about the actual functions of faculty governing bodies. Based on a national survey and a series of follow-up site visits, this article provides a comparative examination of faculty governance at institutions that exist in metropolitan environments and those that do not. In light of the findings, I discuss challenges and opportunities for improving academic governance and the involvement of faculty.

## **Developing a Sample of Metropolitan Universities**

As a contextual guide for defining metropolitan institutions I use concepts established by the Coalition of Urban and Metropolitan Universities (CUMU). The Coalition of institutions was founded based on the premise that universities that exist in urban settings face distinct challenges as a result of their environment. Higher populations of students from diverse cultural backgrounds, greater percentages of non-traditional students, and institutional missions dedicated to servicing local or regional needs represents a few of these distinctions (CUMU 2003). The following CUMU objective is indicative of the interest to establish systems that address the distinctiveness of these institutions: “to assist urban and metropolitan universities in shaping and adapting structures, policies, and practices to enhance their effectiveness as key institutions in the lives of metropolitan regions and their citizens.”

In order to conduct a comparative analysis, a sample of metropolitan universities was selected out of a 2002 national survey on faculty governance (Tierney and Minor 2003). As noted by Holland (2002), the distinction of being an urban or metropolitan university depends on a web of traits including student demographics, the role faculty and administrators play in the community, and the nature of campus-community relationships. Holland (2002) sketches basic characteristics of institutions with “urban

missions." They include: (a) a high concentration of students from the local region, (b) being larger in size, usually with a diverse constituency and multiple interpretations of the mission, (c) historic ties to civic engagement, (d) faculty who adapt to co-curricular activities, and (e) leadership that promotes campus-community relationships. It is important to point out, however, that campuses in rural communities can, according to these criteria, be considered as having an urban mission. And conversely, all institutions located in metropolises do not necessarily meet these criteria.

The 2002 national survey on faculty governance included 763 four-year institutions. As defined by the 2000 Carnegie Classification of Higher Education Institutions, 311 were baccalaureate colleges, 302 were masters institutions, and 150 were doctoral universities representing approximately 50 percent of all institutions from each sector. For example, of the 611 existing masters institutions in the United States 302 were sampled for the study, a rate of 49 percent.

From each institution a cross-section of constituents were sampled. The Academic Vice President (or Provost), the designated faculty leader (i.e., the faculty senate chair), and three department chairs from various disciplines were invited to participate. As a note, I use the term faculty senate generically to mean the predominant faculty governing body. To the extent possible a department chair from humanities and social sciences, the natural sciences, and a professional school were selected. As a result, responses from more than 3,700 individuals were invited.

For the purpose of this comparison, institutions located in cities (or in close proximity of cities) with populations of 250,000 or more were selected as the metropolitan sample. At these campuses, more than 65 percent of the student body is from within the state. Twenty-five percent of the student body is non-white, and each has at least two current campus-community initiatives. Using these criteria, the comparative sample of metropolitan institutions included 83 doctoral universities, 77 masters institutions, and 36 baccalaureate colleges, for a total of 196 institutions. These institutions are compared to a sample of 300 non-metropolitan institutions selected from the balance of the sample (Black 1999).

Undoubtedly, no sample is a perfect representation of any particular population. Some, for example, might argue whether the sampling of department chairs is an appropriate representation of faculty views. At the same time, department chairs at the vast majority of institutions are also members of the faculty and more likely to be informed about the operation of governance. Likewise, being defined as an urban or metropolitan university has as much to do with mission as it does location. The sample here is used simply as a proxy for metropolitan universities that may be more likely to have urban missions than those in more rural locales.

## **Findings**

To provide perspective on the comparative findings, I briefly summarize a few key observations from the initial survey (Tierney and Minor 2003). These findings are

based on data from all institutions and are discussed using three main foci: (1) perceptions of governance; (2) the function of faculty governance; and (3) the structure of faculty governance.

*Perceptions of governance.* One major focus of the survey was to better understand attitudes about the state of academic governance across institutional types and campus constituents. Overall, respondents reported that shared governance remains an important aspect of their institution. Approximately 85 percent of respondents reported that shared governance was an important part of their institution's value and identity. The majority of respondents also reported adequate levels of trust and communication between university constituents. More than 75 percent claimed that the level of trust between the president and faculty was at least sufficient to move forward with university initiatives. More than 70 percent reported that communication between university constituents was sufficient to make progress. Although overall perceptions of governance were positive, there were significant differences across institutional type and by constituency. Academic vice presidents, for example, tended to be more optimistic about the level of trust and communication when compared to faculty. Also, respondents from baccalaureate colleges identified more with the importance of shared governance compared to those from masters institutions and doctoral universities.

*The function of faculty governance.* Another aim of the initial survey was to gauge levels of faculty authority and identify decision-making areas over which they exercised influence. The findings revealed that faculty maintain significant authority in areas that have traditionally fallen under their domain (i.e., undergraduate curriculum, standard for evaluating teaching, and issues pertaining to promotion and tenure). Respondents reported that faculty have the least amount of influence over issues pertaining to setting strategic and budget priorities, policies related to intellectual property, and evaluating the performance of the president. The level of influence varied only slightly across institutional types. Academic vice presidents again perceived the level of faculty influence to be significantly higher across all areas of decision-making when compared to department chairs and senate presidents.

*The structure of faculty governance.* The structural examination was conducted to fulfill the lack of basic knowledge about how faculty governing bodies are organized. Findings from the data showed that although faculty senates represent a central location for faculty participation in governance, it is not the only locale. Academic departments, ad hoc committees, and special advisory committees were also formable venues for faculty participation in governance. It is important to note that structural aspects of governance alone were not necessarily strong indicators of effective governance. For example, the size of the senate, who chaired the senate, or the amount of institutional support received for senate operations were not significant predictors of senate effectiveness (Minor 2003). There were differences across institutional sectors. Baccalaureate colleges, for instance, receive least support for senate operations but report significantly higher levels of interest and participation in senate activities compared to masters institutions and doctoral universities. Baccalaureate colleges also report that academic vice presidents are more likely to chair faculty governing bodies.

## A Metropolitan Comparison

In this section I use two of the three foci (perceptions of governance and functions of faculty governance) to compare the metropolitan sample to non-metropolitan institutions.

### Perceptions of Governance

Overall perceptions about governance among respondents at metropolitan institutions do not differ significantly from those at non-metropolitan universities. Comparisons show that perceptions about the importance of shared governance, levels of trust, and communication are relatively similar. Levels of interest in the senate, however, are significantly lower in metropolitan universities when compared to the non-metro sample. Those in metropolitan universities also perceive the faculty senate to be less powerful.

Although the perceptions of governance are positive, both samples report dissatisfaction with the process of decision-making and low levels of interest in the faculty senate. Fifty-nine percent of respondents from metro universities report dissatisfaction with faculty involvement in governance, compared to 55 percent of non-metro institutions. Concerning the faculty senate, 64 percent of metro universities report low levels of interest in the activities of the senate, compared to 50 percent in the non-metro sample. The table below shows comparisons using five perception indicators. Differences in perception between those at metro and non-metro campuses appear to be concerning their view of the senate.

**Table 1** Perceptions of governance

	Metro	non-Metro
Shared governance is an important part of my institutions' value and identity	80%	84%
The level of trust between faculty and the administration is very good or sufficient to make progress	75%	79%
The level of communication between university constituents is very good or sufficient to make progress	71%	72%
There is a high level of interest in the activities of the senate Others from the campus community view the faculty senate as powerful	30% 39%	42% 49%

## **The Function of Faculty Governance**

Comparisons concerning the function of faculty governance show only minimal divergence between the two samples. That is, the decision areas where faculty exercise influence and the venues through which they participate in governance are similar. Metro and non-metro institutions report having substantial influence over undergraduate curriculum and policies pertaining to tenure and promotion; however, metro institutions report having significantly more influence over graduate education. Both samples report having less influence over setting budget priorities and issues related to distance education. Overall respondents at metro universities report slightly lower levels of influence across all decision-types (except graduate education). Consonant with the trends from the initial survey, academic vice presidents are considerably more positive about the level of authority granted to faculty. For example, using only the metro sample, 44 percent of academic vice presidents report that faculty have substantial influence over setting strategic priorities compared to 30 percent of senate chairs and just 24 percent of department chairs.

Concerning the venues of faculty participation, findings show that academic departments, ad hoc committees, and special committees that combine faculty and administrators are active venues for faculty participation in decision-making for both samples. Although the faculty senate is usually thought of as the primary locale for faculty governance, just 50 percent of those in metro universities, and 56 percent of those in non-metro institutions report substantial faculty participation in governance via the senate.

Within the survey, respondents were asked to identify which among four models of faculty senates best described their institution (Minor, in press). Faculty senates classified as “influential” exhibit formal authority over academic decisions, substantial influence over non-academic matters, maintain collaborative relationships with the administration, and are viewed as a legitimate partner in campus governance rather than an association of faculty. Sixty-five percent of respondents at metro universities identified with this model, compared to 73 percent among non-metro universities. A significant portion of respondents in metro universities (35%) reported having “functional” senates, which are characterized as having limited formal authority (primarily over academic matters), being narrower in scope, and dealing with issues that only directly affect faculty. Tables 2 and 3 show comparisons of faculty influence over various decision types and their participation in a range of venues.

**Table 2** Areas of faculty influence

Decision Types	Substantial Influence	
	Metro	non-Metro
Graduate education	62%	45%
Undergraduate curriculum	83%	89%
Tenure and promotion policy	69%	71%
Setting strategic priorities	30%	36%
Setting budget priorities	11%	14%
Issues related to distance education	28%	28%
Policy related to intellectual property	30%	34%

**Table 3** Venues of faculty participation in governance

Venues	Substantial participation	
	Metro	non-Metro
Faculty senate	50%	56%
Academic department	89%	83%
School/College	53%	50%
Collective bargaining unit	11%	8%
Ad hoc committees	63%	67%
Standing faculty/administration committees	43%	47%

Comparing private and public institutions in the metro sample, there is essentially little difference among perceptions, function, or the structure of faculty governance. Instead the most significant difference exists between constituencies. Evidence of divergent perceptions is consistent across all institutional types. Academic vice presidents view the faculty as having significantly more influence and authority than faculty leaders themselves. In the metropolitan sample, almost 60 percent of academic vice presidents

reported that faculty have substantial influence regarding the institutions' involvement in distance education, compared to 40 percent of senate and department chairs.

A positive interpretation of these findings might be that metropolitan institutions are in no worse shape than non-metro institutions across a number of variables in the study. However, these findings could also be interpreted with concern that there are so few differences. At the outset one might hypothesize that given the characteristics of metropolitan institutions, faculty might be more involved in setting strategic priorities, determining curriculum, influencing issues related to distance education, or be more involved in faculty governing bodies. Faculty at metropolitan universities are in some cases less involved in faculty governing bodies and have no more influence than those non-metro institutions. Based on the survey findings, and more than 15 site visits to various campuses, the following section outlines a few challenges for governance and opportunities for improvement.

## **Challenges and Opportunities**

How important is the role of faculty in governance at metropolitan universities? For institutions committed to urban missions as described by the CUMU, there is a need for effective faculty involvement that reflects cooperation. Adult and continuing education programs, distance education, undergraduate service learning projects, or determining admission criteria are just a few issues that come to mind when considering where faculty influence and participation can help achieve an urban mission. Faculty represent the constituency whereby the majority of success or failure in achieving urban missions rests. Consequently, it does not take an organizational guru to understand the importance of effective faculty involvement in governance. As a follow-up to the survey the site visits were conducted to gain a more in-depth understanding about the issues raised from the analysis. The following are observations (from the survey and site visits) about challenges and opportunities for governance in light of an urban mission.

*Poor articulation.* In another section of the survey, respondents were asked to provide their definition of the term "shared governance." Several varying concepts were provided. Definitions provided by those at metropolitan universities were just as sporadic as those offered by respondents at non-metro institutions. The following summarizes the three most dominant responses: (a) collaborative concepts whereby faculty and the administration jointly make decisions with the goal of consensus, (b) consultative concepts where the opinions of faculty and other constituents are sought but the final decision-making authority rest with the administration, and (c) stratified concepts in which decision-making authority is determined according to the decision type. The understanding is that faculty have the right to make decisions in certain areas and the administration in others.

The point is not to suggest which of these definitions are better but to call attention to how multiple definitions of what shared governance means can be employed on one

campus. The divergent perceptions held by academic vice presidents and faculty about the level of faculty influence are likely the result of varying definitions about the meaning of shared governance. Clear and consistent articulation about what shared governance means is important for reconciling interpretations and expectations. This is especially important for metropolitan institutions that potentially have more comprehensive missions, dynamic constituencies, and external partners.

Equally important is clearly articulating decision-making processes. During a number of visits to metropolitan campuses it was common to find that many faculty were unclear about not only what shared governance meant, but also how decisions were made. This uncertainty effectively raised the level of suspicion and dissatisfaction among faculty. Confusion was further spurred by organizational complexity and multi-level or overlapping decision making units. Institutions with complex organizational structures have to work hard to articulate comprehensible decision-making paths. Doing so will lend legitimacy, credibility, and accountability to decision-making processes.

*Moderate levels of participation.* Issues of moderate faculty participation in governance can always be viewed two ways. On one hand, one might consider that faculty in metropolitan universities are too busy conducting research, teaching students, and interacting with the community to participate in governance. In other words, faculty defer their decision-making authority to administrators. On the other hand, one might consider that faculty governing bodies are viewed as ineffective, dysfunctional, or a waste of time. The fact that more than 50 percent of faculty express dissatisfaction with decision-making processes suggests that neither of these views are healthy approaches.

First, the site visits revealed that there is danger in deference. A faculty too busy to participate in governance can result in policies that compromise the very work they engage in so deeply. One example of such is a campus where the faculty deferred their decision-making authority to the provost and president. In effect the quality of decision-making was compromised due to the lack of healthy debating of issues from multiple perspectives. More importantly, the nature of faculty work and expectations were transformed as a result of faculty neglecting their responsibility to participate in campus-wide governance.

Faculty involvement in governance is best promoted as a cultural expectation rather than something to avert. Burgan (1998) suggests that “those of us who have been engaged in governance have got to try harder to recruit and educate our new colleagues to a broader definition of their calling.”

The alternative view that faculty governing bodies are largely ineffective and dysfunctional creates apathy and can discourage faculty interested in participating in campus-wide governance. On many occasions the culture of eschewing participation is more damaging than structural defaults. A little more than 50 percent of respondents at metro institutions report that the faculty senate is effective in influencing university

decisions under consideration. Both faculty and administrators are critical of faculty governing bodies. The cultural stigma that suggests participation is a waste of time, and the lack of legitimacy given to faculty governing bodies by administrators, are issues in need of attention. Floyd (1994) claims that “administrative posture” can provide creditability and status to faculty governing bodies. The extent that the president and senior administrators support participation in faculty governing bodies through engagement in substantial decision-making can improve the quality of faculty participation.

*Redefining faculty participation.* Respondents across all institutional sectors cited facing expected budget shortfalls as the most critical issue facing their campus in the upcoming year. Yet, faculty reported having the least amount of influence over budgetary matters. The issue of substantial participation today may represent a different nuance than it has in previous years. The survey results show that faculty have maintained authority over academic matters such as curriculum and tenure. However, they still express significant dissatisfaction with decision-making processes. Could it be that effective faculty governance does not mean what it did 30 years ago? That is, does maintenance of academic matters no longer suffice as effective faculty governance? Many faculty during the site visits expressed interest in being more broadly involved in decision-making. This was, in part, due to recognition that all strategic and budgetary decisions influence, to some extent, academic quality.

Also at issue for many metropolitan universities is the increasing need to involve academic staff, graduate student unions, and other constituents not traditionally included in the governance picture. Additionally, a number of “non-traditional” decisions that involve faculty and other constituents, including the legal system, now exist. For example, personnel decisions can now have legal consequences, admissions decisions are shaped by the courts, and degree programs are now influenced by competition. These factors significantly change the governance context and the participants. The opportunity now exists to reconsider what faculty governance is and what it should be.

*Simple assessments.* Although a number of challenges were discovered through the survey and site visits, overall campuses were not in danger of disintegration as a result of governance. In most cases, the challenges that existed on campuses were approachable and changes could be implemented. It was surprising, however, to find that the large majority of institutions had no system in place to evaluate the effectiveness of their governance structures or levels of satisfaction with how well they worked. The survey uncovered that it is possible for campus constituents to agree about the importance of governance and at the same time express dissatisfaction with its employment. Conducting regular assessments of the decision-making context, the culture of participation, and how well structures support the ideals of governance provide opportunities for constant refinement that enhances effectiveness and satisfaction. Assessments can also provide information about who constituents are, how they change, and their expectations for governance.

One president stated: “This time of rather erratic change and experimentation in higher education provides an opportunity and sufficient reason to revolutionize governance structures.” New uses of information technology, more diverse constituents, new programs, and new partnerships create an environment conducive to change at metropolitan universities. This does not suggest that campuses divest in the traditions of higher education or change simply for the sake of changing. Instead, this time provides an opportunity to identify cultural, functional, or structural defects in governance systems while considering new decision-making contexts and ways to improve. Ironically, the term “innovation” is seldom, if ever, associated with governance in higher education. For metropolitan universities such innovation could potentially be used to advance an urban mission.

*The use of multiple venues.* The notion of faculty governance usually conjures up thoughts about the faculty senate. Although more than 90 percent of campuses have a senate (or some form of faculty governance body), the data provide an indication that other venues for faculty participation are useful. For campuses with troubled senates, this means that there are other venues by which faculty can be involved in governance. Multiple venues for faculty participation are also useful for complex organizations, campuses that belong to large systems or those that have multiple campuses. A variety of venues provide flexibility for faculty to become involved where they deem most appropriate, potentially increasing the overall level of participation. The use of multiple venues also provides an opportunity for chief executive officers and senior administrators to engage faculty on multiple levels within an institution.

As a caveat, we should be mindful that multiple venues can also produce negative consequences. In such cases, alternative faculty governing bodies are established to undermine or subvert others. One example is when a university president establishes an advisory committee of faculty in order to have the benefit of perspective, while at the same time, the luxury of disregarding the senate. While these occasions are rare, instances do exist. Overall, however, the benefits of having multiple venues available for faculty outweigh the potential risks. Campuses that employ multiple venues for faculty participation are better served by thinking of creative ways to use them rather than simply being satisfied that they exist.

## Conclusion

The nature of faculty work, funding sources, athletics, curriculum, and many other aspects of colleges and universities has changed significantly over the last three decades. Yet, the concepts of faculty governance have changed very little. For metropolitan universities with urban missions, what should faculty involvement in governance consist of? Given the distinctiveness of the urban mission, should governance practices resemble so closely those at non-metropolitan campuses? Beyond the matter of faculty governance lies the issue of more clearly defining what it means to be a metropolitan university and whether governance practices and policy truly reflect the institutional character.

Finding ways to effectively involve faculty in governance continues to represent a challenge on many campuses. Yet, systematic efforts have not been undertaken to bring about reform. During this season of change in higher education, metropolitan institutions are prime locations for experimentation with innovative governance concepts and structures. I also believe significant improvements can take place without divorcing traditional values of higher education. Governance structures represent the means through which decision-making authority is granted. Effective decision-making represents the process through which colleges and universities achieve their objectives. Given the declaration of what it means to be a metropolitan university as outlined by the CUMU, governance policy and practices aimed at achieving urban missions will be required for success.

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