Locus of Authority: The Evolution of Faculty Roles in the Governance of Higher Education

reviewed by Rozana Carducci — September 26, 2015

coverTitle: Locus of Authority: The Evolution of Faculty Roles in the Governance of Higher Education

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The practice of shared governance is contested terrain in American higher education. Despite consensus that shared governance is a collaborative approach to decision-making characterized by the distribution of authority across various institutional actors (e.g., faculty, senior administrators, trustees), models and norms of effective shared governance remain elusive. Indeed higher education critics within and beyond the academy often identify the practice of shared decision-making as a major barrier to innovation and fiscal efficiency, two organizational qualities deemed essential for survival in today’s rapidly changing global knowledge economy.

In Locus of Authority: The Evolution of Faculty Roles in the Governance of Higher Education, authors William G. Bowen and Eugene M. Tobin offer their insider perspective on the promise and pitfalls of shared governance. They draw upon both historical analysis and their own extensive university leadership experience to explain why antiquated, yet omnipresent, governance structures and processes are ill-equipped to resolve contemporary higher education challenges. At the heart of Bowen and Tobin’s shared governance treatise is the assertion that since faculty are pivotal in advancing and/or thwarting institutional change efforts, higher education actors seeking to improve governance processes and institutional outcomes need to first understand the historical evolution of faculty roles in governance. Bowen and Tobin argue that this historical knowledge is key to successfully navigating and perhaps shifting the political, economic, social, and cultural factors that influence the exercise of authority in American higher education.

The structure of Locus of Authority is comprised of an informative preface, five chapters, and a lengthy appendix consisting of four institutional case studies. The narrative is engaging and fairly easy to digest thanks to Bowen and Tobin’s decision to use footnotes to cite sources and provide extended discussions of material readers may find interesting but that are not crucial to the main story. Readers looking to dive deeper into the historical sources and governance anecdotes will appreciate the accessibility and depth of the footnotes. Bowen and Tobin’s familiarity and focus on the governance roles of arts and science faculties in selective institutions are evident throughout the book. Individuals interested in learning about the history and practice of governance in more diverse institutions will need to consult other sources.

The Introduction provides a coherent overview of the book’s organizational framework and clearly articulates the authors’ focal argument—century-old shared governance norms are ill-equipped to tackle the complex problems confronting contemporary higher education. In support of this argument, Chapter One presents a historical overview of faculty governance from the establishment of the Harvard Corporation in 1650 through the World War II era. Chapter Three extends the historical analysis to the present day, supplementing the authors’ general historical overview with extended excerpts from four institutional case studies. It closes with a discussion of faculty governance tensions occurring within institutions seeking to engage in or expand online learning endeavors. Drawing upon analysis of successful and unsuccessful online education efforts, Bowen and Tobin seek to illustrate: (a) the need to respect institutional culture when launching major reform efforts, (b) faculty distaste for considerations of cost savings in educational decision making, and (c) the importance of a strong central administration in negotiating decisions concerning online education institutional strategy, instructional content, and intellectual property rights.

Together the historical overview chapters effectively distill and integrate important moments in the evolution of higher education governance, relying extensively on the analysis of highly regarded higher education historians such as John R. Thelin, Laurence R. Veysey, Frederick Rudolph, Jurgen Herbst, and Roger L. Geiger. The organization and content of Chapters Two and Three mirror the chronological historical frameworks adopted in most higher education history texts and illuminate key faculty governance issues (e.g., academic freedom). Occasionally the historical narrative loses focus or gives limited attention to key historical moments—for example, the governance implications embedded in the Affirmative Action and Title IX efforts of the 1960s and 1970s. While Bowen and Tobin’s historical analysis is not highly original, they effectively synthesize historical scholarship on the evolution of faculty decision-making authority into one volume, a project of value to higher education governance scholars and institutional actors (e.g., trustees, academic senate members, etc.) interested in understanding the history behind contemporary governance practices. Case study vignettes interwoven throughout Chapters Two and Three add depth to the sweeping historical narrative and underscore the importance of local context in shaping governance processes and structures.

In Chapters Four and Five Bowen and Tobin examine the contemporary governance roles of faculty and offer their informed opinion on whether minor or major changes are needed to develop governance processes that reflect changing societal needs and institutional characteristics. For example, drawing upon both their historical analysis and personal leadership experience, Bowen and Tobin do not see a need for major changes to the norms regarding faculty participation in presidential appointments and reviews. Unsurprisingly, however, the authors call for substantive changes concerning faculty oversight of online learning, challenging faculty to “give up, cheerfully and not grudgingly, any claim to sole authority over teaching methods of all kinds” in exchange for “an important seat at a bigger table” (p. 173).

To close the book, the authors supplement their broad historical analysis with four institutional case studies: the University of California, Princeton University, Macalester College, and City University of New York. While these case studies effectively illustrate the contextual nature of higher education decision-making, they lack the depth of structural detail and vivid description needed to understand complex governance processes and outcomes. Bowen and Tobin might have been wiser by narrowing the scope and extending the depth of the institutional portraits in the interest of chronicling the evolving scope and nature of faculty authority. Additionally, lengthy case study excerpts are interwoven through the book, contributing to a sense of redundancy when reading the book cover to cover.

Locus of Authority is co-published by the ITHAKA project, an independent not-for-profit organization focused on the potential of digital technologies to advance higher education teaching and learning endeavors. Although initially difficult to comprehend, the relevance of Bowen and Tobin’s historical analysis to ITHAKA’s mission becomes evident when the authors argue for technologically-mediated solutions to rising college costs (see also Bowen, 2013) and identify faculty control of instructional decisions as significant barriers to the expansion of cost-efficient online education initiatives.

Locus of Authority is not a call for the end of shared governance, but the book does frame an argument to fundamentally disrupt norms concerning the scope and nature of faculty decision-making authority. In response to a perceived need to establish governance systems that reflect digital learning environments that transcend departmental boundaries and disciplinary specializations, Bowen and Tobin advocate for a “horizontal” form of governance characterized by strong senior administrative leadership and a “networked” faculty willing to participate in governance efforts that respond to broad, campus needs “without the expectation of controlling outcomes” (p. 184). Although Bowen and Tobin claim that their objective is “not to diminish faculty roles [in governance] but rather to facilitate the most effective contribution of faculty to university life in a new day” (p. 11, emphasis in original), this claim is undermined in Chapters Four and Five which clearly articulate an agenda for strengthening and extending the scope of administrative authority. Bowen and Tobin’s horizontal governance model does not exclude faculty, but their roles and influence are certainly curtailed.

Bowen and Tobin’s governance reform agenda in Locus of Authority will likely resonate with senior leaders at selective institutions seeking to expand their authority and expedite the pace of institutional change. Trustees, presidents and their administrative colleagues will find the text a valuable source of rhetoric and institutional anecdotes that can be called upon to justify efforts to increase the scope of top-down academic decisions. Faculty, particularly those actively involved in governance processes, are likely to be less sanguine that Bowen and Tobin’s proposals to reimagine higher education governance will respect and protect faculty authority to make decisions concerning academic program development and management.

References

Bowen, W. G. (2013). Higher education in the digital age. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

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