**Critique of Faculty Participation in Shared Governance at University of Wisconsin-Madison**

**Introduction**

This document summarizes an ongoing discussion about the faculty’s role in shared governance, and proposes ways to strengthen this process at UW-Madison. It is based on conversations with over two dozen past and present participants in shared governance in the UW System administration, UW-Madison administration, faculty, staff, and students, and on the author’s experiences as a UW-Madison faculty senator and service on standing and ad hoc shared governance committees. The document is being submitted to the University Committee for consideration, refinement, and possible action, including communication with UW-Madison and UW System administrations as appropriate.

Shared governance means, essentially, that decisions about educational issues are made after consulting with experts. An important challenge to its effectiveness is the fact that, increasingly, faculty are given neither time nor credit for their involvement in this process. Access to training and mentoring is limited or non-existent. As a result, the workings of shared governance can seem opaque and ultimately unimportant, leading to the often-asked questions “does it work, and is it worth my time?” Consider, for example, the following paraphrase from an assistant professor in his second year on the faculty senate:

*I deeply care about UW-Madison and shared governance, but the faculty senate has been a low priority, in part because this role is not valued or rewarded by my unit leaders. I have to balance dozens of academic responsibilities, not to mention my personal life. I review the Faculty Senate agenda and attachments the day of the meeting. Often, they provide me with little or no understanding of the background or key features of the topics. At the meeting, very few topics are discussed, and, for those that are, the same few individuals make comments, often from only one perspective. I enter the meeting insufficiently prepared, and leave feeling frustrated.*

This document a work in process. Share your thoughts about what’s right, what’s wrong, what’s missing, and better or additional ways to improve shared governance. Keep in mind the fact that these comments represent impressions expressed by multiple people. In cases where they do not reflect the actual practice of shared governance, they still reflect misunderstandings that need to be countered by effective communication.

**Current Perceptions of Shared Governance Performance**

Many of those interviewed for this essay who were familiar with shared governance at other institutions commented that UW-Madison has maintained one of the strongest systems. Several elements are particularly strong at UW-Madison.

1. Administration – University Committee (UC) communication. The UC serves as the executive committee of the faculty senate. It meets for updates and Q&A with the chancellor weekly, the provost biweekly, vice chancellors monthly, and with faculty and shared governance committee chairs as needed but at least annually.
2. Faculty and shared governance committees provide annual reports to the faculty senate. The large majority of shared governance activities are managed very effectively through this route.
3. The Office of the Secretary of the Faculty provides excellent guidance and logistical and informational support for shared governance.

With few exceptions, perceived concerns relate primarily to the effectiveness of lines of communication and flow of information among participants, rather than the absence of appropriate structure or design, and cluster around the following:

1. Communication among the UC, faculty senators, faculty, and other shared governance groups.
2. Training and mentoring in shared governance.
3. Participation by faculty.
4. Current faculty senate meeting structure often does not permit sufficient and robust discussion of important issues.
5. Exclusion of appropriate shared governance constituencies from relevant decisions, mostly by UW System administration and the Board of Regents.

Although UW System and the Board of Regents are separate from UW-Madison, many of their actions directly influence, and often constrain, shared governance decisions at UW-Madison. For this reason, they are included here. The following section identifies concerns related to shared governance functioning. The section after that addresses potential steps that could improve the process. A number of these steps will have been tried in the past, but perhaps should be revisited or revised to move us forward.

**Concerns**

University committee (UC). UC members are the designated representatives of the faculty senate (and faculty). Collectively, they are knowledgeable, dedicated, and hardworking, and provide real strength to shared governance. Several aspects of functioning could be improved.

1. Communication to faculty senators and faculty. Faculty often lack knowledge of history, background, and pros and cons for current issues or resolutions. They also lack real-time awareness of the identity and status of current and pending issues.
2. Communication from faculty senators and faculty. There are no formal UC listening sessions, and without detailed UC meeting agendas faculty generally won’t know when they could be present to speak about issues they find important.
3. Cross-governance unit communication. The UC has a responsibility to consult as necessary with other shared governance groups, and commonly does, but lacks a formal structure to accomplish this task.

Faculty Senate and Faculty. The faculty senate consists of 10% of the faculty, who are elected by their department or comparable unit. The following concerns have been identified.

1. Extent and quality of knowledge. Many faculty senators report spending little time reading meeting materials and no time considering issues outside of the faculty senate meetings. Resources are not readily available to learn the history, details, and status of current and pending shared governance issues. Without this information, decisions can be poorly informed.
2. Extent and quality of training. Formal training in the understanding of shared governance theory and practice is minimal, and informal training is highly variable.
3. Mentoring. Mentoring of faculty and faculty senators is highly variable.
4. Lack of credit for service. In many units, faculty state that they receive little or no workplace credit for contributions to shared governance, which diminishes faculty senate credibility and discourages enthusiastic and serious participation.
5. Faculty senate meeting dynamics. Meeting materials and meetings are not designed to allow robust and substantive description, consideration, and debate of very many significant issues. Meeting discussions can be over-reliant on vocal subsets of senators.

UW-Madison Administration. As noted in Appendix 1, different constituencies in the university have certain responsibilities, and shared governance decision-making should reflect the distribution of responsibility for each issue being considered. By virtue of its strong interaction with the UC, administrative decisions tend to reflect appropriately the UC input. However, the following concerns have been raised.

1. Insufficient consultation. Occasionally, decisions seem to be made administratively with inadequate shared governance participation, which then need to be readdressed by the UC or shared governance committees.
2. Removal of position-search oversight from the Secretary of the Faculty. Direct administrative management of searches to fill administrative positions creates potential conflicts of interest.

UW System Administration. According to the UW System’s “Shared Governance Guidelines and Process” document ([https://www.wisconsin.edu/governance-representatives/download/systemwide(2)/Shared%20Governance%20Guidelines.pdf](https://www.wisconsin.edu/governance-representatives/download/systemwide%282%29/Shared%20Governance%20Guidelines.pdf)),

*The respective responsibilities of the Board of Regents, the UW System President, Chancellors, Faculty, Academic Staff, and Students arise from the longstanding Wisconsin tradition of shared governance. This system of shared governance, as it is commonly understood and practiced within the UW System, is based on the premise that the above-mentioned parties all contribute to the leadership of the System and the understanding that inclusiveness leads to better decision-making. This tradition calls for a process of Regent and UW System policy development that includes faculty, academic staff, and students, as appropriate to the nature of the policy. Effective policy development comes from early, active, and wide collaboration and consultation.*

Over the last 5 years, UW System administration has ignored its own shared governance guidelines while making several major decisions over which faculty or others had primary expertise and responsibility. Specific criticisms include the following:

1. Lack of “official” shared governance bodies.
2. Failure to effectively manage the shared governance process, including providing shared governance groups with sufficient notice, so as to enable timely and consistent issue resolution.
3. In some cases, failure to consult at all about shared governance issues with governance groups, including faculty and university administration, which damages trust in the System administration.
4. Increasing workloads by imposing poorly designed actions System-wide.

UW Board of Regents (BOR). According to the “Statement on Government of Colleges and Universities”, “In order to fulfill [its] duties, the board should be aided by, and may insist upon, the development of long-range planning by the administration and faculty.” Instead, the Board often has developed unilateral policy without appropriate consultation with the individuals who have expertise on, and are most affected by, the decisions, which in any academic or business environment constitutes bad practice. Specific concerns include:

1. Failing to consult appropriately on shared governance issues.
2. Making changes in university Faculty Policies and Procedures without faculty consultation.
3. Adopting a policy on hiring of College/University senior administration that is inconsistent with proper shared governance practices.
4. More generally, limiting public discussion of issues by the BOR prior to making decisions. The question has been raised of whether the Board has conducted business via a “walking quorum”.

**Potential Steps to Strengthen Shared Governance**

Actions are grouped based on the 5 clusters of concerns listed on page 4 of this document. Where appropriate, overlap across clusters is noted. Many or all of the following recommendations could be modified and strengthened by your own comments, and you may have additional recommendations that give better solutions. Please participate in this effort to support shared governance by sharing your thoughts.

Communication among the UC, faculty senators, faculty, and other shared governance groups.

1. Establish a real-time directory of current and pending issues under consideration by the UC and the administration, to include history, background position statements (for and against), and potential costs and benefits.
2. Establish a similar real-time directory for long-term planning initiatives related to “big picture” issues in research and teaching.
3. Create a mechanism for faculty, staff, and students to identify and sign up to assist with specific current, pending, and long-term issues and initiatives.
4. The UC Chair should remind faculty senators of this resource at each senate meeting, and briefly announce new and pending issues.
5. Ensure UC agendas list issues to be discussed; alert interested faculty or others (taken from 3 above) prior to relevant meetings.
6. Consider scheduling periodic shared governance listening sessions with one or more members of the UC and/or administration that are open to faculty, staff, and students.
7. Consider establishing a formal council or working group to include members of each shared governance component that meets on a regular basis.
8. Provide sufficient support to the Office of the Secretary of the Faculty to manage issue directories, track issue progress, and support decision resolution, implementation, and follow-up assessment.

Training and mentoring in shared governance.

1. Develop and offer comprehensive training in principles and practices of shared governance, designed for participants at all stages of their careers. Format will vary to meet specific objectives, from one-page digests for new faculty and staff to training workshops in shared governance best practices for faculty senators, committee chairs, UC members, and staff or students equivalents. In particular, provide new faculty senators with appropriate and substantial orientation.
2. Develop comprehensive mentoring strategies to encourage participation and refine skills in shared governance.

Participation by faculty.

1. Improve communication among faculty, the faculty senate, and the UC (see above).
2. Improve training in shared governance (see above).
3. Improve mentoring in shared governance (see above). The core of several dozen people who are very active in shared governance should each identify two or more “mentees” who express interest in participating but lack experience.
4. Perhaps most importantly, unit heads (deans, department chairs) and departmental faculty must place value on diligent shared governance participation, and be willing to grant appropriate credit.

Current faculty senate meeting structure often does not permit sufficient and robust discussion of important issues.

1. Issues/resolutions placed on the faculty senate agenda should be linked with explanatory text giving background, pro and con position statements, and potential costs and benefits so that senators understand the larger context in which each issue must be considered.
2. Issues raised at a senate meeting (including substantive amendments to motions), should be presented with sufficient background and contextual information during the meeting to enable thorough discussion. If there is not time for full discussion, these issues should be tabled or referred to a standing or ad hoc committee for further consideration.
3. Senators must be encouraged to express their views out loud at meetings.

Exclusion of appropriate shared governance constituencies from relevant decisions, mostly by UW System administration and the Board of Regents.

1. UW System lacks an effective formal shared governance structure; faculty and staff advisory councils should be made official governance bodies.
2. UW System must follow its own shared governance guidelines; specifically, relevant participants should no longer be excluded from discussion, or included too late in the process to be effective.
3. Establish a real-time directory of current, pending, and long-term issues under consideration at the UW System level. Create a mechanism for administrators, faculty, staff, and students to identify and sign up to assist with these issues.
4. BOR discussions should take place in meetings open to the public, and encourage participation by individuals with appropriate expertise.

**Closing Remarks**

Returning to where we started, recall that the whole point of shared governance is to support the best possible decision making for our universities, which are state, national, and even world treasures. That goal is non-partisan, and something we all should support. Effective shared governance requires time and effort, one more “administrative burden” on the shoulders of very busy people for which they may receive scant workplace credit. Even with effective structures and procedures in place, shared governance will fail if participation by faculty, staff, and students falls below a critical mass. In that case, we should not complain when others make our decisions.