

[Shared Governance in Times of Change; A Practical Guide for Universities and Colleges](#)

Steven C. Bahls, Association of Governing Boards Press, 2014.

Reviewed by Beauvais Lyons, Chancellor's Professor and Immediate-Past President of the UTK Faculty Senate

Executive Summary:

In this brief book, Bahls offers many useful insights for faculty members, administrators and trustees in considering the importance of thinking of shared governance as a system to help aligning institutional priorities. The book is published by the Association of Governing Boards, which was consulted as part of the effort to advocate for more accountability for the UT Board of Trustees as part of the UT Focus Act. With new boards of trustees being installed for the UT system on July 1, 2018, as well as new campus level advisory boards, it is important for faculty leaders, campus and system administrators, as well system and campus level board members to discuss what shared governance means, and ways that it can help inform the decision-making processes of the university and its constituent campuses.

The book, which is only 106 pages in length, is organized around the following six chapters:

Chapter 1. Why Work for Effective Shared Governance?

Bahls outlines the challenges that universities face to foster transformative change, which is done with a shared sense of urgency and timely strategic planning. He emphasizes the importance of creating processes that build trust, understanding, and goodwill. He stresses transparency and working to identify common goals across the differing perspectives of faculty leaders, administrators and trustees. He writes “When shared governance is understood and practiced as a system of identifying and aligning priorities, institutions will be able to move through moments of friction more smoothly. Shared governance can – and should – provide boards, faculty, and administrators with a way of working collaboratively toward a common vision.”

Chapter 2. Competing Views of Shared Governance

The author compares three traditional (and inadequate) perspectives on shared governance; 1) equal rights to governance, 2) shared governance as consultation, and 3) shared governance as rules of engagement. On the next page is a table (Exhibit 2) in which he presents an analysis of these approaches. Bahls offers an assessment of how each of these three traditional concepts of shared governance present obstacles to addressing new challenges, facilitating informed and timely decision-making, helping to bring about faster and more effective implementation, etc. Some of the key challenges with common approaches to shared governance are to ensure mutual investment in outcomes, greater participation, as well as fostering a culture of civility. Bahls identifies four components of shared governance as a system (Exhibit 3), also on the next page, and stressed the importance of creating a culture of transparency and open communication. He argues that with a better system of shared governance that involves “participatory decision-making,”“decisions will be higher quality and more effectively implemented.”

Exhibit 2. Shared Governance: Goals and Perspectives

Shared governance as...				
	Equal rights	Consultation	Rules of engagement	System for aligning priorities
Ability to address new challenges	Sacrifices flexibility and risks impasse during times of changes	Allows board to frame forward-looking issues, but does not achieve real faculty engagement	Perpetuates focus on discrete issues as defined by boundaries from the past	Focuses on holistic, strategic directions for the future
Better-informed, more timely decisions	Increases time to reach decisions and encourages "three-humped camel" compromises	Fosters information sharing, which leads to better decisions	Provides checks and balances, but does not create a shared sense of direction	Features transparency, which improves the quality of decisions
Faster, more effective implementation	Shortens implementation once decision is reached	Slows implementation because a lack of participation in decision making	Establishes a process for implementation	Requires more frequent interaction, which may slow decision making but speed implementation
Mutual investment in outcomes	Supports alignment because decisions are not made until consensus is reached, but consensus may be difficult to achieve	Provides information but does not necessarily garner support for outcomes	Has credibility with faculty, so responsibility for results are more likely to be shared	Builds mutual commitment because outcomes are jointly developed
More satisfying participation in governance	Confuses the respective responsibilities of the board, president, and faculty	Overlooks importance of stakeholder involvement	Has credibility with faculty	Brings board and faculty together around passion for the institution
Model of civility	Supports democratic principles, but may encourage political gamesmanship	Discourages participatory leadership	Focuses on boundaries in authority, which may lead to fragmentation	Demonstrates that collaborative leadership yields better results

Exhibit 3: Components of Shared Governance as a System



Chapter 3. Shared Governance: Law and Policy

Bahls cites the Model Nonprofit Corporation Act, which informs the role of governing boards in the context of state laws regarding not-for profit organizations. Tennessee law regarding public institutions of higher education upholds many of these same principles. Bahls also addresses shared governance in relation to accreditation and governing documents (such as faculty handbooks). While shared governance is not a legal concept, it is reflected in many accreditation and governing documents.

Chapter 4. Overcoming Barriers to Effective Shared Governance

The author identifies common board and faculty structures that represent barriers to effective decision-making. Most important, Bahls identifies “behavioral barriers” that undermine a culture of decision-making and leadership. He attributes the rise in the number of university president no-confidence votes to a lack of transparency, communications that undermine trust, and the failure to draw upon the inherent differences between faculty and board cultures to create a more effective marketplace of ideas, to facilitate better decision-making. Bahls emphasizes that, while effective shared governance is more work for faculty, administrators and trustees, it has much greater potential to bring about comprehensive institutional change.

Chapter 5. A Practical Guide to Shared Governance

In this chapter, Bahls offers some ways that effective systems of shared governance can help a university better align strategic planning, setting goals and assessing the effectiveness of achieving student learning outcomes, and making decisions about the direction and mission of the institution. Especially when universities face financial exigencies, in this chapter he reiterates the importance of including faculty leadership in university finances, as well as to create meaningful opportunities for faculty leaders to communicate any disagreements to administrators and board members. He also stresses domains where faculty should have primary decision-making authority, including oversight of academic programs and tenure and promotion, while also recognizing the fiduciary responsibilities of trustees. In the area of strategic planning, he emphasizes the importance of involving elected faculty leaders, administrators and trustees.

Chapter 6. Best Practices in Shared Governance

In this chapter, Bahls emphasizes the importance of involving faculty leaders on all board committees, as well support programs that strengthen faculty self-governance. He also advocates for universities to periodically conduct a shared governance survey. A sample survey is included in the index of the book.

About the Author

Steven C. Bahls has been the president of Augustana College (Rock Island, Illinois) since 2003. He has served on the boards of national higher education organizations including the Council of Independent Colleges and the National Association of Independent Colleges and Universities, and on the NCAA Division III Presidents' Advisory Council. His scholarship is the area of business law and agricultural law.