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Viewpoint
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The Future of Leadership in Public Universities: Is Shared Leadership the Answer?

Abstract: *Leadership of public universities has come under fire—from scandals, from funding, from students, from every direction. Top-down leadership of institutions of higher education has been described as a "disease." Shared governance—a mechanism of faculty representation in the leadership and decision-making processes—a seeming alternative, has been described as "a recipe for paralysis." In this article, the authors proffer shared leadership as a potential elixir for leading public institutions of higher learning, unleashing creative potential, focusing on pressing strategic imperatives, and enabling sustainable systems that leverage true talent to maximum effect. It is time to move beyond the moribund myth of top-down heroic leadership and beyond the bureaucratic, political quagmire of the current state of affairs in shared governance. Is shared leadership the answer?*

Leaders of public universities are under fire—from scandals (e.g., Luca, Rooney and Smith 2016), from funding (e.g., Condrey and Battaglio 2007), from students (e.g., Jones 2006), seemingly from all directions. Concomitantly, very few faculty desire taking on leadership positions, and faculty largely characterize administration as "the dark side" (Bradshaw 2015). At the same time, public university administrative roles have become increasingly demanding, adding development, fundraising, and novel tuition-generating activities, to name a few, to already overbusy administrative assignments. Faculty want administrators to deliver resources that, for the most part, they do not have the authority to give. Is it any wonder that job dissatisfaction has led to a continuing decrease in the average tenure of senior administrators? (Bradshaw 2015; June 2017). The future of university leadership appears challenging, at best: "people who are called upon to lead universities in the twenty-first century face difficult tasks for which they are, in general, unprepared" (Altbach 2011, 1).

A Core Problem (and Resource) for University Leaders… The Faculty

The problem between faculty and university administrators is deep. On the one hand, we, as faculty, claim that we want bold visionaries to lead us into intellectual and educational breakthroughs (to be honest, most of us really want administrators to come up with money), and on the other hand, we want to be the sole genesis of all changes or, at a minimum, to be consulted on everything—and we do mean everything—before any action is taken (Pardun 2013). What are administrators to do?

To answer this question, we must first ask, who are the leaders in universities? The reality is that every single faculty member is a leader in his or her own right. Scholars are knowledge workers (Drucker 1969; Evans 2017), and knowledge workers are leaders of themselves (Manz 1986); they provide thought leadership for others in their respective fields—just ask them. With so many leaders running around, it is no wonder that the state of affairs is a bit confusing regarding university leadership.

The Crestfallen Myth of Top-Down, Heroic University Leadership

Research-based advice for senior administrators is clear: they need to enable organizational vision; they need to be fair; and they need to be inclusive (Berson, Waldman and Pearce 2016; Gigliotti 2017). These imperatives are especially salient in the university context (Altbach 2011). Public university administrators who violate any of these imperatives are at extreme risk of failure. Yet the pressures on these leaders are significant. They are pushed for evermore results in a constantly changing environmental landscape (Bradshaw 2015; Pfeffer and Fong 2002). It is easy to succumb to these pressures for results and slip into strong top-down leadership. Science shows this is true: "Tough times make tough bosses" (Scully et al. 1994, 59). In academia, this type of top-down leadership has been described as a disease (Bedeian 2002).

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University administrators who disregard faculty in pursuit of their top-down will are bound to fall from grace (for an example, see Manz and Pearce 2018). The alternative proffered for administrators is to rely on shared governance, which for decades has been considered the standard for faculty involvement in university leadership (Bahls 2014; CHEPA 2003). While the concept of shared governance is clearly superior to simple top-down, command-and-control leadership, we argue that shared governance is typically either impotent and perfunctory or combative and adversarial in the vast majority of institutions of higher education (Gerber 2014; Ginsberg 2014). This begs the question, what is the future of public university leadership?

A (Perhaps Cynical) View from the Top

University administrators are in a pickle. Their feet are increasingly held to the fire for delivering bottom-line results. Therefore, they have been encouraged, strongly, to assume bold visions and to champion the garnishment of resources to feed their educational machines. They are incentivized to produce, and they are harshly criticized or even face dismissal if they fail to deliver results. These forces tempt many senior administrators to engage in heavy-handed, top-down leadership—those leaders fall victim to the leadership disease (Bedeian 2002). Why do some administrators fall into destructive leadership patterns?

These leaders do not believe they have the luxury of the painstakingly slow pace of intellectual deliberation, ad nauseam, of the most trivial and insignificant details of strategic imperatives that is characteristic of shared governance. Therefore, senior administrators take on more and more of the development, design, and implementation of strategic initiatives while attempting to minimize faculty "meddling" in progress. While this first perceived impediment to action, from the administrative point of view, has innocuous motivation based on the academic mind-set of investigation and debate (and consideration and consternation), the second perceived impediment to administrative action is a bit more selfish and sinister: many faculty senators and committee members below them view their role as protecting their home turf against possible administrative incursions (June 2017).

Most shared governance, for instance, is focused on populating committees with proportional representation of faculty to address such things as curriculum, human resource issues, and even a committee or committees. They are primarily concerned with forming committees with representatives of the various scholarly units rather than with experts for the stated purpose of each committee. These standing committees then act as gatekeepers as opposed to sources of innovation. It is for these and many other reasons that we question the current state of affairs of shared governance: shared governance is best described as "a recipe for paralysis" (Gonch 2013).

Is Shared Leadership the Answer?

Shared leadership involves the simultaneous, ongoing emergence of multiple leaders focused on enabling key talent to emerge, relative to the task requirements at hand, to facilitate the accomplishment of overarching common goals (Pearce and Conger 2003). The empirical evidence on shared leadership is impressive (Pearce and Sims 2002; Wang, Waldman, and Zhang 2014). The fundamental goals of public universities are to create and disseminate cutting-edge knowledge, through teaching and research, while ensuring educational and financial sustainability in the process. Standing committees do little to facilitate this. Shared leadership provides the possibility of aligning, reinforcing, and leveraging the common interests of administrators and faculty (see figure 1).

Faculty desire for their expertise to be deployed; they want to build their knowledge profile; and they want to attain scholarly

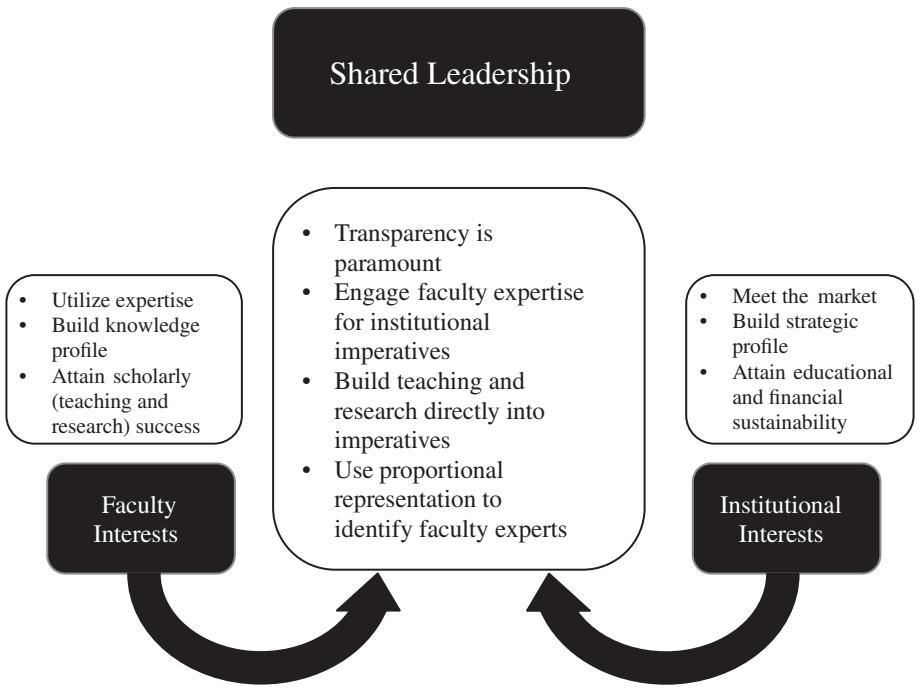

Figure 1 Leveraging Leadership for Better Governance

success through both teaching and research (Miller, Mamiseishvili, and Lee 2016). Administrators have goals as well. These goals center on meeting the market, building a strategic profile for the institution, and attaining educational and financial sustainability (Bolden et al. 2012; Bradshaw 2015). The convergence of these complementary agendas can be realized through shared leadership (Akilli et al. 2014; Harris et al. 2016; Wassenaar and Pearce 2018), where the emphasis is on transparency; engaging expertise for institutional imperatives; building teaching and research directly into the imperatives; and using proportional representation to identify experts.

Convening experts and laser-focusing their efforts through shared leadership is exactly how to enable public universities to thrive (Pearce 2004). For example, as opposed to a standing committee composed of representatives of all of the departments, why not rely on experts for such activities—experts from human resource management and industrial organizational psychology might come together periodically as a task force to identify the most talented and gifted individuals for any other given temporary task force to address a strategic need. For instance, suppose a task force is desired to design a new teaching evaluation system. Here the task force might call for experts in education, policy, motivation, evaluation, and change management.

When it comes to a task force on university budgets, perhaps experts from finance, economics, and accounting should be those tapped to share the lead. If we shift our attention to a task force on enhancing student outcomes, experts might be identified from pedagogy, technology, sociology, adult development, co-curricular engagement, survey methods, and evaluation. The key for all of this is that people need to set their personal egos aside, as well as refrain from simply serving as political representatives for their home departments. Beyond such administrative functions, shared leadership is particularly important when it comes to the ethical equation: by leveraging greater engagement in leadership from a broader base of constituents, one activates robust mechanisms to guard against ethical lapses (Pearce, Wassenaar, and Manz 2014) and the resultant university scandals that seem unfortunately prevalent today (Luca, Rooney, and Smith 2016).

Focus on the overarching mission becomes far more possible when standing committees are the exception rather than the rule and temporary task forces for specific issues become the norm. This enables the focus of such shared leadership groups to move from the skeptical perspective of shared governance to the trust perspective of shared leadership; from the reactive model of shared governance to the proactive model of shared leadership; from the gatekeeper role of shared governance to the creative decision-making role of shared leadership; and from the compliance stance of shared governance to the affective commitment perspective of shared leadership. Figure 2 graphically depicts this shift in orientation.

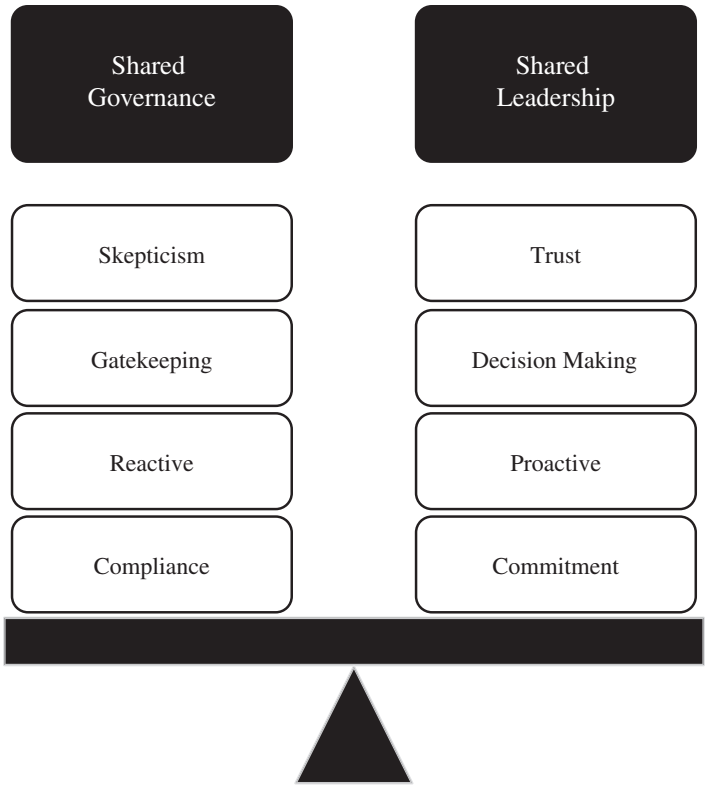

Figure 2 From Shared Governance to Shared Leadership

The Power Paradox

Power is sometimes thought to be a fixed quantity, with the resultant attitude that whatever power I have, I must guard and protect. This is the de facto reality of shared governance (Gonch 2013). If, however, we view power as something that can grow by empowering others (Srivastava, Bartol, and Locke 2006) to engage their full capabilities on appropriate tasks and then measuring and managing according to overarching standards regarding knowledge creation and dissemination, as well as financial sustainability, the game changes. Power actually increases for everyone—everyone that is producing. The only individuals/groups that will lose power are those that do not perform. But why would we, collectively, want underperformers to retain disproportionate power?

Rationally, we don't. No one can rationally defend such a proposition, but the shared governance model is infused with just such an unintended outcome—it is an insufficient model, at least as it is generally implemented in the vast majority of public institutions of higher education. While we do not advocate for the growing for-profit sector in higher education, we do believe that these institutions are closer to the mark in certain aspects of how they manage themselves. They are focused on disseminating knowledge that the market desires, in a way that is financially sustainable. Where they miss the mark, horribly, is in knowledge creation, as well as in disseminating the higher-level knowledge that is required for intellectual breakthroughs.

The reality is that shared leadership gives faculty members the true voice they desire; it taps expertise; it enables real inherent knowledge, skills, and abilities to be applied to pressing issues; and it does not waste time (well, not nearly as much time).

The Future of Public University Leadership

Top-down leadership is not defunct. Shared governance is not without merit. In fact, even though we have identified a number of problems associated with top-down leadership and with shared governance in many public universities, we actually view both as

useful components of the health of such organizations. Leadership from the top is imperative—senior administrators are responsible for the overarching vision; for shepherding the organizational values; for ensuring the ethical climate, but they need to engage the shared leadership of the faculty in the process if they are to be optimally successful (Akilli et al. 2014; Kok and McDonald 2017). Shared governance, on the other hand, guards against, for example, the abuse of power; it ensures that multiple constituents are consulted and provides a degree of voice. Shared governance, however, must change dramatically. If our public universities are to thrive, they require courageous top-down leadership, strong shared leadership, and just a little appropriately focused shared governance—but how best do we create such conditions?

Selection and training are the keys. Selecting the people with the proper orientations for leadership positions is essential. Nothing is more important when it comes to the future of public university leadership. Screening out potential administrators on such dimensions as Narcissism, Machiavellianism, and psychopathy, the so-called dark triad (Paulhus and Williams 2002), is a good place to start. But how many institutions actually do this? None that we could find.

Beyond selection, it is critical that we educate administrators and faculty alike (North-Samardzic and Cohen 2016; Pearce 2004) on the latest findings from research regarding how to effectively lead from the top (Leavitt 2005), as well as develop shared responsible leadership (Pearce, Wassenaar, and Manz 2014). Leading from the top can be highly rewarding, but when we engage the collective spirit of the faculty community, writ large, the ability to realize bold, sustainable visions becomes far more plausible. We advocate for shared leadership as a critical component of enabling the sustainable future of our public universities—we are all in this together.

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