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FACULTY

A Common Plea of Professors: Why Can't My Faculty Senate Pull More Weight?

By J. Clara Chan JULY 06, 2017



Jerry LaSala (at microphone) was chairman of the Faculty Senate at the U. of Southern Maine three years ago when the president announced agonizing job cuts. "I don't think we had a lot of power," he says in retrospect, "but I think in the long run we did have influence that will make things better."

If you'd asked Walter Heinecke six years ago what the Faculty Senate at the University of Virginia did, he would have had a hard time responding.

"The only thing I had heard was the anecdotal kinds of things — that the senate had a reputation of not really dealing with important issues, not deliberating about important issues, and wasn't really seen by the administration as something of a significant player," Mr. Heinecke, an associate professor in UVa's Curry School of Education, recalls.

But after members of the Board of Visitors attempted to oust President Teresa A. Sullivan five years ago, all of that changed. The Faculty Senate quickly [galvanized](#) professors, students, and alumni to protest Ms. Sullivan's ejection. And only a week after Ms. Sullivan was forced to resign, the senate reproached the board with one of the most common tools of faculty senates nationwide: a [vote of no confidence](#). Days later, Ms. Sullivan was [reinstated](#).

Mr. Heinecke, who is entering his fourth year as a senator and second year on the senate's executive council, recalls the ouster as what inspired him to restart the university's then-dormant chapter of the American Association of University Professors. (That chapter was responsible for connecting the senate to the national organization, which sent a team to Charlottesville, Va., to investigate the resignation and [published a report](#) condemning the board's actions.)

At the time, many professors viewed the affair as a resounding win for the senate and for the principle of shared governance. But since the Sullivan controversy in 2012, Mr. Heinecke says, UVa's senate has, for the most part, reverted to its old ways.

In meetings, Mr. Heinecke says, "we have a lot of information presented, but we're not doing a whole lot of deliberation."

"That's been one of the criticisms of the senate," he says. "The senate meetings don't really engage faculty members in a lot of deliberation for action."

Professors have long complained about faculty-senate lethargy, and they have questioned how much the governing bodies are able to accomplish. But as tensions between administrators, faculty, and students have increased over the past few years — particularly over issues like free speech — more professors say they are seeing the consequences of weak faculty governance.

"An active, engaged faculty senate is crucial for a university to be progressive and dynamic and innovative. You want a university where new ideas are generated from the ground up, not from the top down," Stephen F. Eisenman, a former president of Northwestern's Faculty Senate, says. "It certainly causes more controversy, and the arguments — disputes of all kinds — will be messy, but that messiness is where new ideas, innovation, and progress happen."

So why isn't more messy progress being made in faculty senates?

Leadership veterans describe something of a vicious cycle: If faculty members are not engaged in the senate and voicing their concerns, the senate itself is limited in what it can accomplish. Before long, the senate can acquire a reputation that it's not powerful or effective. Once that reputation has taken root, faculty members may not view the senate as a meaningful place to spend their time, leaving a body of disengaged senators. Even if a senate with a weak reputation does become more active, administrators may see it as lacking clout. If they don't respect its resolutions or demands, that only adds to the sentiment that the senate isn't capable of pushing for change. During a crisis or controversy — when statements of support or disapproval are most powerful — the role of the faculty senate can seem clear. Several faculty senates, for example, have issued statements about hot-button issues like campus free speech, as when American University's senate [voted to reject](#) the use of trigger warnings. Others have come together when large challenges face the university — such as the attempted ouster of Ms. Sullivan at UVa or

when administrators at the University of Southern Maine [unveiled a plan](#) to cut about 50 tenured and non-tenured faculty jobs, in addition to program and wage cuts.

But in the absence of major controversy, a tough question looms: How can a faculty senate remain an active place for professors to engage in day-to-day business?

"Obviously, if I knew the answer, we wouldn't have that much trouble recruiting more people," Jerry LaSala, a former Faculty Senate chair at Southern Maine, says.

A Systematic Problem

The struggles facing faculty senates are difficult to pin on one source.

First, there's a recruitment problem. For many professors, especially junior faculty aiming for tenure, lengthy meetings take away crucial research and teaching time without adding much to their personal careers. Because of this, Mr. Eisenman says, senate roles are often filled by tenured faculty members who are nearing retirement and don't necessarily have their ears to the ground. Or the positions go to junior faculty who don't have time to be active contributors to academic governance. (Another issue of representation: Adjuncts, who constitute a large percentage of faculty, generally aren't allotted many seats on a senate. Furthermore, many are disinclined to serve, either because they are too busy or because they do not expect to stay at an institution over the long haul.)

"Some departments take the process very seriously, others don't," Mr. Eisenman says. "Some will have several people who run. Others, the chair might say to somebody, 'Hey, Sally, why don't you do it this year?' And she'll say, 'Oh, I'm not sure I want to,' and the [chair] goes, 'Oh, I think you should. And that will be that — it's not really an election.'"

Then there's the adage about how power tends to corrupt. Walking the line between faculty members and university officials, senate chairs can feel pressure to appease the administration, veterans of the position say. Perhaps they do so by silencing faculty dissenters or advocating for policies administrators favor; either way, they can fail to be meaningful leaders for a university's entire faculty.

"You feel honored to be in that room" with top administrators, Mr. Eisenman says, "and you feel like you're a big shot, because until this point you're just a faculty member, and here you are and you're being told you could offer leadership to the entire university. The risk if you take a critical, adversarial perspective is that administration will largely ignore you."

And that's the other problem facing faculty senates: Ultimately, administrators usually can ignore them. Since they're not their universities' executive governing bodies, faculty senates don't have the power of the board of trustees to create and approve universitywide policy changes or make final decisions on job cuts or upper-level hiring. That often leaves them ratifying strongly worded statements or creating proposals and hoping for the best.

"Anything we passed could be overturned by the trustees. Anything," says Larry Hubbell, a former chair of the University of Wyoming's Faculty Senate. "It was rather frustrating being a Faculty Senate chair simply because of the powerlessness that you felt."

At the University of Southern Maine, which faced programmatic and faculty job cuts in 2014, the best the Faculty Senate could do was to draft a proposal with alternative solutions. While a few faculty were reinstated, most of the senate's suggestions were not taken, according to Mr. LaSala.

"What we did get to do was force the administration, and beyond them the trustees, to look more carefully at the implications of the decisions they were making," Mr. LaSala says. "I don't think we had a lot of power, but I think in the long run we did have influence that will make things better."

Other Paths Forward?

Faculty dissenters, both in and outside the senate, are looking to other methods in which to advocate for change.

For some, that means reactivating or creating local AAUP chapters to serve as watchdogs of the senate and the administration. About 150 local chapters have either been created or reactivated in the past five years, according to a spokeswoman for the national AAUP.

At the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, a series of incidents — the controversy surrounding the [cancellation of a history course](#) that examined a recent academics scandal involving athletes; the [mandated closure](#) of the UNC School of Law's Center on Poverty, Work, and Community, by the university's Board of Governors; and the board's proposal to ban the law school's Center for Civil Rights from [pursuing litigation](#) — have led some faculty members to plan meetings for this summer and fall in an effort to restart the AAUP chapter.

"Board-level and administrative-level interference in academic freedom and shared governance is not unique to Chapel Hill, but is a trend throughout higher education in the U.S.," Sherry Kleinman, a sociology professor at UNC, wrote in an email to *The Chronicle*. "All the more reason to strengthen or start AAUP chapters across the country."

Others, such as the former Northwestern clinical professor Alice Dreger, have turned to organizations like the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education to advocate on their behalf. Ms. Dreger [resigned](#) from her position at Northwestern's medical school after she accused administrators of trying to censor an academic journal essay.

"It certainly would have been nice if there had been an active faculty governance that I felt like I could have appealed to, but faculty governance historically has basically ignored the needs of people in the position I was in," Ms. Dreger says.

As tensions continue to grow at universities over free speech and shared governance, faculty input on core university issues will be crucial, according to Peter Bonilla, FIRE's vice president

of programs. But the balance of power between a university's leaders and its constituents — and how faculty governance fits into this — still needs to be struck.

"I think a lot of us are feeling that the current climate is extremely polarized right now," Mr. Bonilla says. "We would love to come to whatever that middle ground is, but we're clearly having a hard time figuring out what it's going to take to get us there."