

Governance and Trust at Bucknell University

Successful shared governance is a mixture of structure and culture that enables an academic community to move forward in resolving problems and achieving excellence. There is no academic “cookbook” listing all the necessary ingredients that must be added in a particular manner to create a successful governance system. There are, however, two essential ingredients: effective communication and mutual trust. It is our assessment that the primary problems facing Bucknell are that internal communication is flawed and that the degree of trust between the president and the faculty is inadequate.

A wide range of effective governance processes and structures exist in American higher education, making it difficult to compare institutions and even more difficult to identify specific “best practices.” Oftentimes, governance systems are idiosyncratic: what works well for one institution might not work at all for another. To be sure, particular processes or structures can be unacceptably cumbersome, or essential processes and structures can be missing. Deficiencies like these would of course require immediate attention. In our opinion, however, deficiencies of this magnitude do not exist at Bucknell.

Nevertheless, even the best governance structures are capable of improvement, and it is good practice to review one’s governance system periodically. Our review of faculty governance at Bucknell leads us to the recommendations below (in no particular order) for faculty and administration consideration. Some of these recommendations concern changes in faculty governance while others involve revisions of administrative structures. We believe that their adoption would strengthen shared governance at Bucknell.

Promotion and Tenure

1. Clarify and make more transparent the policies and procedures governing tenure and promotion decisions.
2. Consider enabling the president and/or provost to make an independent recommendation concerning tenure and promotion (with the explicit understanding, as the AAUP recommends in its 1966 *Statement on Government of Colleges and Universities*, that disagreements with faculty recommendations would occur rarely and for compelling reasons that the president would share in detail with the faculty).
3. Create a policy that allows professors from other institutions to be hired with tenure, at least when filling an endowed chair.
4. Make promotion and tenure processes consistent across departments.

Faculty Governance

5. Discuss the creation of a faculty senate that would possess representational authority and decision-making powers.
6. Create an executive committee of the senate/faculty, with a faculty chair, that possesses more than convening authority. Such a committee should at a minimum be empowered to work with the administration on matters of process and should be able to speak for the faculty on matters not under the purview of a standing faculty committee.

7. Provide summer stipends for the chair and/or executive committee so that faculty representatives can be available for consultation about issues of concern to the faculty when the university is not in session.

Committee Structures

8. Clarify and streamline the roles and functions of committees. Where overlap exists, eliminate a committee. Where no charge exists, create one or eliminate the committee. In particular, split the Planning and Budget Committee in two so that one committee concentrates on long-range planning and another deals with budgetary issues.
9. Clarify the reporting authority of and path for recommendations from faculty and university committees, and include this information for each committee in the faculty handbook.
10. If the charge of the “executive committee” does not include finding nominees for faculty committees, create a committee on committees that performs this function and is responsible for cross-communication among committees.

Decision-Making Positions

11. Provide human resource training for department chairs based on their assessment of what assistance they need to improve their work.
12. Increase the power and authority of the deans.
13. Expand the power and authority of the provost, and the capacity of the provost’s office, so that whoever serves in that position can function as the academic leader of the faculty and the on-campus leader of the university.

Faculty Handbook

14. The faculty handbook is a conglomeration of sometimes too-specific and sometimes too-general policies about a variety of issues and topics. Clarity and consistency, moreover, seem to be virtues that the handbook honors more in the breach than in the observance. Hire an outside consultant to work with the faculty on revising the handbook after the previous recommendations have been implemented.

While we believe that the adoption of these recommendations will strengthen faculty governance at Bucknell, we must stress that adopting these recommendations will not resolve the underlying tensions that currently exist. As one individual noted, “Effective shared governance does not mean that if we disagree with the president, the governance structure is flawed.” And as a student observed, “Usually what they do is think ‘How can I get the other guy to agree with me?’ It’s a lot of squabbling. No give and take.” No individuals or groups feel that they have any power, and everyone is wary of ceding power to others. In a high-performing college or university, if group or individual “x” is powerful, it does not mean that group or individual “y” is less powerful. An academic organization should cultivate an ethos of creative conflict that allows individuals to disagree with one another while agreeing to move forward in a deliberate manner.

A sense of inertia and a mood of wariness and distrust currently pervade the governance system at Bucknell. These problems will not be overcome by instrumental activities, although such activities can improve the system. In order for Bucknell University to achieve the ambitious

goals it has set for itself, an internal communication strategy must be developed that will enable the president and senior administration to build better relationships between constituencies—relationships characterized by trust and mutual respect .

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