



APRIL 2022

SHARED GOVERNANCE

**AT VCU: INCREASING AWARENESS OF SHARED
GOVERNANCE AMONG FACULTY**

Executive Summary

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Introduction

Institutions of higher education have a lot to consider when making decisions that impact university operations and the college environment. For example, they must reflect on who should be involved in the decision making process and if the balance of power proportionately reflects the investment of the stakeholders and their responsibility to implement change. Which decisions should faculty govern and which matters should be regulated to the administration? Where do our institutions go to get the answers for these deciding factors? When colleges and universities come to a crossroad in deciding what matters, shared governance should be engaged to outline the decision making process. Shared governance holds the key to unlocking many of these puzzling questions; however, when faculty and administrators seek these questions in shared governance, the answers are not always present.

The composition of institutions of higher education has changed rapidly. It is important to have a comprehensive understanding of the role of shared governance to influence policies, procedures, and the process of institutional decision making to ensure equal balance of power and stakeholder engagement over periods of time. In an effort to uncover the answers of who governs which matters and how shared governance operates during challenging times, our research team undertook the task of gaining a better understanding of shared governance.

The American Association of University Professors (AAUP) chapter at Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU) has requested the assistance through this capstone project as a means to understand the current perceptions and increase awareness of shared governance at VCU. The capstone project was conducted with three guiding questions:

1. What is shared governance as understood through relevant literature and practice?
2. What are the current faculty perceptions of shared governance at VCU?
3. How can awareness of shared governance be increased at the institution?

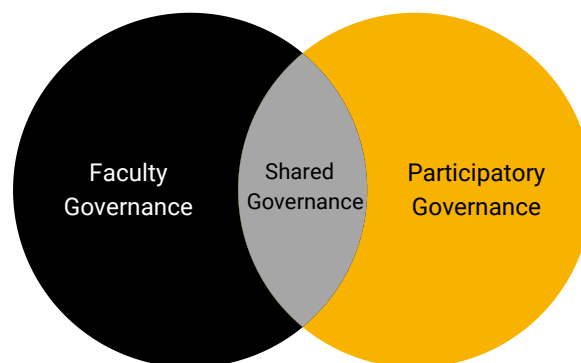
The findings of this capstone project generated recommendations for the VCU AAUP chapter to assist in developing a collective definition and enhancing shared governance practices at the institution.




Literature Review

The concept of shared governance and all it encompasses is not entirely clear. The ways in which university personnel define, interpret, and enact shared governance are often highly individualized and contextualized. The information collected from literature and qualitative research methods indicated varied nuanced and specific understandings of shared governance. While many of the definitions have common themes and hope to receive the same end goal through policy and procedures, the individual meanings and missions dictated inconsistent application in practice.

Equally important, and embedded in the understanding of shared governance, was the need to know how shared governance will be structured and implemented. Generally, the review of literature indicated that shared governance occurs when there is a common definition and a climate of trust whereby multiple stakeholders take part in informing institutional practices through shared expectations, values, and engagement. Shared governance can be defined as the collective and mutual oversight of university operations partaken equally by faculty and administrators (Bahls 2014; Cramer 2017; Gerber 2014; Johnston, 2003; LaForge 2020). The figure below illustrates how the literature currently describes the intersection of governance at universities.





The literature suggested several best practices that have been shown to have an impact on the successful implementation of shared governance practices across postsecondary institutions (Bahls, 2014; Cramer, 2017; Gitenstein, 2017; Honu, 2018; Johnston, 2003; LaForge, 2020; Quarless & Barrett, 2017). The capstone project was heavily influenced by Bahls (2014) research and derived seven commonly recommended practices from the literature.

01 *Developing a Common Definition*

02 *Setting Common Expectations for Engagement*

03 *Creating a Climate of Trust*

04 *Reviewing Processes Regularly*

05 *Rewarding and Recognizing Participation*

06 *Developing Personal and Working Relationship*

07 *Ensuring Work is Action Focused*

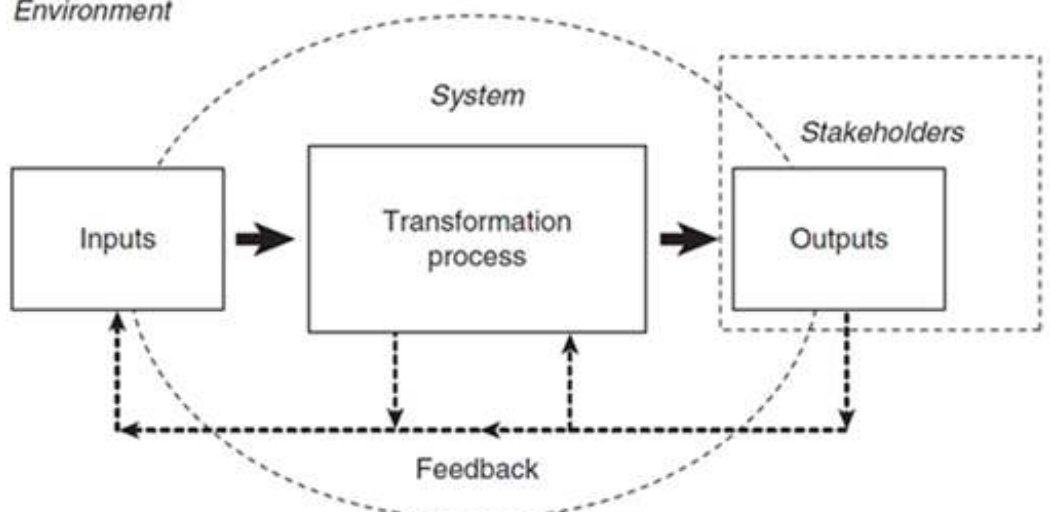
Methods

Theoretical Framework

Systems theory was selected as the theoretical framework for this research project. Wilkinson (2011) defined systems theory as “a conceptual framework based on the principle that the component parts of a system can best be understood in the context of the relationships with each other and with other systems, rather than in isolation”(p. 1). This particular definition best encompasses this research project. Figure below visually represents the core components and relationships espoused in systems theory.

Systems Theory Representation

Environment



Note. Systems theory. From Key concepts in organization theory (p. 169), by J. Luhman and A. Cunliffe, 2013 SAGE Publications Ltd. Copyright 2013 by John Luhman and Ann Cunliffe.

The shared governance process at the university is an example of systems theory: whereby the institution is the system, and shared governance is the transformation process. It is important to note that in systems theory, feedback should flow both into and out of the transformation process before a final output is delivered to all stakeholders. In a similar vein, shared governance should be a multi-staged process with communication and engagement opportunities throughout the decision-making process. The research project closely examined the thoughts and ideas of faculty members on the system of shared governance at VCU.

Methodology

The team determined a naturalistic approach would best encompass the many components of the project and yield rich information on the faculty's perceptions of shared governance at VCU. A naturalistic research approach allowed the research team to collect qualitative data and analyze those data using inductive and deductive analysis to understand the problem of practice. The project was broken up into two main parts:

1. Literature Review

The first part of this project was the completion of a comprehensive review of relevant literature related to shared governance within higher education. The literature review was divided into five key components: a history of shared governance, defining shared governance and its benefits, best practices in shared governance, current trends, and future considerations, and issues on the horizon.

2. Narrative Research

The research team utilized three components to collect descriptive information relative to faculty knowledge, attitudes, and perceptions of shared governance at VCU. Narrative methods were selected to best understand the lived experiences, perceptions, and awareness of faculty through one-on-one interviews and focus groups. The researchers completed a series of focus groups with VCU faculty, followed by individual interviews. Additionally, a modified charrette, or design thinking workshop, was utilized to understand faculty recommendations for increasing the awareness of and engagement with shared governance at VCU. These three components allowed the research team to gather a cross-section of faculty perceptions of shared governance through their personal experiences at the institution.

- **Focus groups**

Eight focus groups; two were face-to-face focus groups that occurred in-person on the Monroe Park campus and six were facilitated virtually via Zoom. 29 participants at the end of the study. participants represented university faculty from multiple units, varied faculty ranks, and varied involvement in governance structures. 6 open-ended questions and prompts designed to gain in-depth responses. The specific questions were based on the literature review gathered on common concerns and recommendations for best practices, predominantly influenced by Bahl's 2014 framework.

- **Individual interviews**

Interviews were necessary to obtain detailed responses that offered robust descriptions of faculty knowledge, attitudes, perceptions, and were used to gain further understanding from stakeholders who were not able to participate in focus groups. Additionally, the research team specifically included outreach to faculty of color and faculty on the tenure track to participate in the interviews. Eleven responses were received to participate. The targeted participants represented university faculty from multiple units and faculty rank.

3. Modified Charrette

Participants of the modified charrette were recruited solely from the VCU AAUP chapter membership. Seven AAUP members responded with interest, six participated. Ideas informed by the modified charrette allowed for the redesign of shared governance to enhance governance practices and increase VCU AAUP chapter participation in governance efforts at the institution.

Limitations

There were a number of limitations including:

1. Time constraints set by the doctoral program to complete the project
2. Lack of a central communication method to engage all university faculty which potentially resulted in a low yield rate of faculty participation.
3. Low faculty participation, specifically low involvement and response from MCV campus, faculty of color, and tenure eligible faculty.
4. Sample was largely skewed to those invested in the topic of shared governance, which potentially may be lacking the voice of faculty who are not engaged in governance.
5. COVID modifications may have inhibited faculty engagement or influenced engagement.

Findings

Through the review of literature, focus group and interview data, and a modified charrette, researchers identified a series of findings related to how faculty at VCU experience shared governance. The data collected across all components of this study provided a robust understanding of faculty perceptions of shared governance at VCU and ideas to increase awareness at the institution. In the findings, the researchers thematically analyzed the data in response to each of the three research questions.

Research question one was answered primarily through the literature review which yielded information on some commonly held beliefs in defining what shared governance is thought to be. The literature review indicated there are a variety of definitions and interpretations of shared governance across institutions. The bottom line is, a common definition should be adopted and the mission and purpose of the institution should dictate the specific interpretation and application of shared governance. Best practices were identified through the literature to ensure effective implementation of shared governance. The literature review findings were supported by the study participants' voices who articulated a need to further understand shared governance and its practice at VCU. Research questions two and three were answered through the data collected from participants through the focus groups, interviews, and modified charrette.


From each data collection method utilized, several themes emerged. Research question two delved into faculty perceptions of shared governance at VCU. Themes that emerged from interviews, focus groups and the modified charrette centered on the themes of too much administrative power, faculty engagement in shared governance, and a desire for change. These larger themes emerged from common experiences from participants while secondary themes about lack of reward, apathy resulting from the lack of trust, fear of retribution and decision-making power also emerged. Research question three centered on how awareness of shared governance can be increased at VCU.



The data showed that shared governance can be increased at VCU through two overarching themes: creating collective understanding and increasing engagement. Study participants spoke about the need for a common definition, common structures, and common engagement opportunities to create a collective understanding. To increase engagement, participants noted the need to build trust, increase engagement, and increase transparency through involvement, processes, and rationale. Both of the overarching themes were identified as focal areas to increase shared governance at VCU.

These themes are detailed in the charts below.

| <i>Research Question 2: What are the Current Faculty Perceptions of Shared Governance at VCU?</i> | Themes | Subthemes |
|---|-------------------------------|---|
| | Too Much Administrative Power | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Top-down decisions • Futile governance structures • Bylaws and constitutions not followed |
| | Devalued Faculty Engagement | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Being valued • High risk, low reward (fear of retribution, apathy from lack of trust, lack of reward) • Being engaged effectively |
| | A Desire for Change | |



| <i>Research Question 3: How can Awareness of Shared Governance be Increased at the Institution?</i> | Themes | Subthemes |
|---|-----------------------------------|---|
| | Create a Collective Understanding | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Common Definition • Common engagement structure • Common engagement expectations • University structure and engagement |
| | Increasing Engagment | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Building trust • Increasing communication • Increasing transparency |

Recommendations


The data collected from the literature review, focus groups, interviews, and modified charrette provided a robust understanding of faculty perceptions of shared governance at VCU and ideas to increase awareness at the institution. The researchers used the study findings to inform their recommendations for this study. The themes across all three research questions yield two overarching categories to consider increasing awareness and improving the practice of shared governance at VCU: structure and culture. Structural components speak to the need to standardize systems, workflow, and communication methods between university stakeholders. Cultural components suggest a need to increase trust, engagement, and the value of engaging in shared governance.

Structural Changes

Structural recommendations are built from the findings related to systems, workflows, and communication methods between university stakeholders. Cultural recommendations encapsulate themes of trust, engagement, and the value of shared governance. In the end, VCU needs to make a set of structural and cultural changes to best support the systems and execution of shared governance. In order to accomplish the task of increasing awareness of shared governance at VCU the researchers make the following recommendations.

1. Develop a University-wide Shared Governance Policy
 - a. Create a common definition of shared governance
 - b. Create a shared governance webpage
2. Review and Assess VCU's Shared Governance Bodies
 - a. Review unit level and institutional structures
 - b. Review for consistency across units and effectiveness at the institutional level
3. Develop Standard Structures and Bylaws for Governance Across Units



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4. Augment Communication Channels
 - a. Use of website
 - b. Pathways for communication across units
 - c. Standardized template for sharing outcomes of shared governance processes

Cultural Changes

Additionally, VCU should consider the following cultural changes to improve the climate of shared governance and increase engagement. Assessment of the culture should be conducted on a regular basis to understand how the proposed environment and institutional values are evidenced in lived experiences of faculty and staff. The researchers recommend four specific cultural changes for consideration: creation of a shared governance dashboard, increase trust, increase engagement, and increase the value of shared governance.

1. Create a Shared Governance Dashboard
2. Increase Trust
3. Increase Engagement
4. Increase Value of Shared Governance

Meet the Team



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