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Our University: Shared Governance and Collective Bargaining

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Our University: Shared Governance and Collective Bargaining

The Congressional Record, August 1985, provides a revealing perspective held by Albert Shanker, former President of the United Federation of Teachers from 1964 to 1984 and President of the American Federation of Teachers from 1974 to 1997, regarding his job as a union leader.

When school children start paying union dues, that's when I'll start representing the interests of school children."

You have to admire his unabashed transparency. More rather than less such clarity regarding motive could actually be useful in framing issues of governance and mission at our institutions of higher learning, giving us a way into productive negotiations to improve teaching and learning.

Shared governance is a simple and powerful concept. In a university, where the nature and substance of the institution is determined by the faculty, it and university leadership should share the process of direction setting and decision making.

Shared governance as a formal concept has been part of university culture for nearly two centuries, but in practice has been the norm for two millennia. In 1828 Yale University faculty members produced a document, ***The Yale Report of 1828***, to defend its curriculum in classical studies and the role of faculty in sustaining that curriculum. A balance between the concerns of the community, represented by the board and the administration, and the concerns of the university, represented by its faculty, is a strong foundation from which to govern a university.

Shared governance and participation by the many brings ideas to the surface from different perspectives, all focused on the same ultimate goal.

Collective bargaining is a different concept with a different history. The ideas are not interchangeable.

Collective bargaining is the market process by which employees negotiate their needs and wants with the management of the organization for which they work. Originally this was to assure that profits were distributed between those who did the work and those who took the risk in an industrial setting. We forget what a step forward this was in an earlier age where worker deaths were considered little more than a cost of doing business.

The results of the collective bargaining process are contracts for a predetermined term that describe wages, working conditions, benefits, safety, overtime, and grievance processes. What they do not produce are statements of vision or organizational purpose. Those responsibilities are ceded to management.

In a shared governance process, all parties work to diminish distinctions between labor and management. Not so in the collective bargaining process. Here distinctions

between labor and management are increased and a wall is erected between the two, so that each tends to its own interest.

The assumption in the case of shared governance is that incorporating different points of view strengthens an organization's ability to meet its overall goals. In the case of Yale University, the issues were about providing the best educational experience for students. Collective bargaining processes address work-life quality and pay for one subpopulation of the university, without explicit concern for institutional effectiveness or the fundamental goals of the university, such as providing a superior workforce for future generations to help maintain an acceptable standard of living for the broader community.

Confusion may have been exacerbated by the NEA in a 1987 statement regarding shared governance, and further, by the AFT in 2002, by not distinguishing clearly enough the different processes. Whether this omission was by design or default, it must be addressed.

In a collective bargaining environment the force of labor law, guided by the National Labor Relations Act, supersedes many concerns that a faculty senate might have regarding the university and the work that it carries out for students.

Faculty senates are becoming less central to university policy setting. Direction is increasingly being set by unions represented by professionals from outside the educational environment whose interests may not be compatible with those of the institution.

One faculty union leader told me, *"You can't name an issue important to the university that is not part of the working conditions for which we bargain."* But universities are not instituted for the benefit of employees and faculty.

Employees, faculty and administration are brought together to serve the needs of students and the larger community. It is a noble purpose to which we commit our efforts, and while methods for reaching it should be negotiated and crafted with input from diverse constituencies, that ultimate aim itself must never be compromised in the name of expediency.