

CUFA BC Meeting “The Future of Governance” – Jan 17-18, 2024, Vancouver

Report by Julita Vassileva

As a long-serving member of University Council and fairly new member of the USFA Executive, I have participated actively in Collegial Governance since I joined the University of Saskatchewan. That is why I was very interested in attending this conference, and I was delighted that it addressed all aspects of Collegial Governance in a deep, existential way. The speakers provided well-reasoned perspectives, the panelists shared diverse experiences and the audience was active and responsive. <https://cufa.bc.ca/conference/governance-conference-2024-speakers/> Below are my main takeouts from the conference. They are based on my detailed notes. I tried to shorten them, but felt that richness of the discussion around the topics would be lost if I tried to abstract only the main messages.

Main takeout:

Universities are crucial to preserving democracy in society. We maintain a space for the possibility to speak truth to power. This mission is crucially important in the time of world-wide back-sliding democracy. If faculty do not step to leadership, governments, corporations and bankers will.

1. Universities are facing unprecedented existential threats. Admin, board, faculty unions are in this together.

The external threats are:

- Societal changes: Rise in populism, anti-science and anti-intellectual movements, social media providing unlimited forum for every voice.
- Economic situation: post-pandemic, financial crisis.
- Government: Budgetary restraints, direct appointments, strategic mandates, bargaining mandates, enrolment corridors and differentiation exercises.
- Neoliberalization: Government’s use of market-based practices and criteria to organize the university and judge the success of its components: cost-recovery, students as consumers rather than learners.
- Corporate Interests: Driven by an emphasis on fundraising for endowments, named chairs, and infrastructure. Corporate interests have enormous influence over the kinds of activities the university will support. University boards are dominated by corporate interests.

The internal threats are:

- Senior administrators, drawn from the private sector, bringing elements of corporate culture, containing or marginalizing faculty involvement in the decision-making process regarding academic issues: seeking to eliminate meaningful faculty involvement in workload planning and assignments, developing course offerings and workload adjustments, and end runs around the senate.
- Personnel: move away from “open” and towards “closed” searches for senior administrations to the benefit of head-hunting firms and the detriment of CG.
- Faculty withdrawal from CG due to many reasons: generational change (retirements of experienced faculty), high workload and burnout for faculty; perception that all efforts

to change things for good are futile, lack of understanding of how CG works and its importance.

- Some faculty associations view Collegial Governance (CG) spaces like the Senate as a rubber-stamping body. Some Unions see CG in competition with collective bargaining; these are Self-imposed divisions between union- and academic issues. However, academic decisions fundamentally impact workload and resources.

Paradoxically, Faculty Associations (FA) have become one of the few sources of power left to defend robust and meaningful collegial governance by using collective bargaining to mandate consultation, negotiation, representation, and shared decision-making on a whole host of issues. Unions use legally binding grievance procedures to contest administrative overreach and violations of collegial governance. Unions save collegial governance by actively organizing and mobilizing members to fill key service roles. The preservation of CG rests on strong FA. CG means shared responsibility on curriculum design, establishment of programs, centers, collegial evaluation process, advisory committees to review and renew senior admin.

We are all in this together: Board, Administration, Council (Senate), Faculty Unions, Staff, Students.

At the end of the day, faculty and administration have a common interest and should work together. Collective bargaining is an adversarial process, but we need to realize the bigger common goals. Being in an adversarial relationship doesn't mean it can't be collegial. Boards and senates are conservative; this is not a flaw but a feature.

Unions need to give the University some flexibility b/c if the university doesn't change, it won't survive. As we are entering this highly hostile environment, we should work together to protect and sustain (what?). The universities will change, but how and what do we want to protect?

2. Faculty participation and engagement is paramount

We cannot delegate the responsibility for governance only to the Administration and Board. We need to keep a close eye on the actions of the Administration and the Board to be active in the Senate (University Council). Disagreement is good. Unions and Senates should not behave like an official opposition. Unions should not enforce governance. Presidents, boards, senates, FA should not be blaming each other. Reject the MacKinnon distinction - that Labour Relations should be separate from Collegial Governance. But they shouldn't be conflated either. The conceptual difference between academic freedom and freedom of expression is like the distinction between Labour Relations and CG.

In Canada, we have the strongest collegial governance in the world. In many countries it is a strictly top-down affair. It is true that there is neoliberalism etc. but because we are unionized Canada is quite different. The existence of faculty associations (FA) and collective agreements (CA) is protecting us from top-down power and managerialism. Academic Freedom and CA create a time capsule for Academia in Canada. We steward them by using them. The biggest danger to this time capsule is apathy. Apathy comes from being overworked and not believing that one can make change.

Problems:

- People don't understand governance; faculty don't understand the role of the board, or what management involves. It is important to educate everyone on how the university works. Service should be called "leadership" and leadership should be oriented towards service.
- Not just faculty, most of the administrators are inexperienced in governance, they get little training and orientation when they move from faculty to admin job. They have heavy jobs, work long hours, lots of conflict, stress, high stake decisions.

→ If admin jobs also have a heavy workload, why not share it among faculty and reward it properly (as it currently is for high-level administrators), instead of hiring more administrators? Faculty need to be involved in all levels of governance, to give an example of democratic values.

→ We need to encourage young faculty early to get involved and gain experience in governance. Service in CG committees should be rewarding because it is an essential part of being an academic. It is as important as research and teaching. We need to find ways to reward it. It is in our power to do this through collegial governance: Faculty serve on evaluation committees which develop the standards, they carry out the peer-evaluation process, sitting on promotion and tenure committee and we make decisions on how to count them and value participation in governance activities.

When administrators participate in governance, it is called "leadership" and is rewarded generously. When faculty do this work – it is called "service", and "work for suckers". This work is "appreciated" but not counted or rewarded when done by faculty. How do we change this?

→ It should always be called "leadership" not "service".

Encourage your colleagues to engage in governance (dept heads, deans etc.) Encourage them to serve on Senate (Faculty Council).

- → Education in CG for everyone, every group is important!
- We have the most diverse faculty and engaging them is crucial for the future. The number of vice and associate deans is staggeringly high across Canada. We say disapprovingly, "Moving over to the dark side", but we need smart and thoughtful people to engage in leadership.
- Diversity is important, we can and should have the voices of new faculty. We want them to succeed, but protecting new faculty from CG work until they get tenure is wrong. They need to develop their voice, develop relationships across the university.
- Participation in governance needs to have more than intrinsic reward if we want faculty to engage in it. Each admin job is heavy workload, so why not share it among faculty and reward it, instead of hiring more administrators?
- → Organize meetings of faculty members in advance of Senate meetings to discuss the agenda, identify important issues and threats (to the quality of programs, workload etc.) and help come up with a reaction → How to change senates from rubber-stamping bodies to active CG entities.

- Promote Adaptive management: if you worry about an issue, bring it on to your Dean, or VP. Early and constructive engagement can solve many problems or not allow them to evolve.
- Find allies among provincial organizations.

Question from Audience: How do we move the dial for government funding towards universities?

→ in provinces with conservative government, it would be very hard. We should try to make the best use of targeting funding governments provide e.g. PhDs in clinical psychology or nursing...

→ if we can't successfully lobby the governments in populist governments, we can still engage the public (alumni, retirees, schools); we can be a "lighthouse" instead of an "ivory tower".

Shame them for not being woke, for being racist and privileged. Try not to encourage this mentality in your students. But we also need to listen to people and genuinely engage.

→ but be very careful with attracting the attention from Government! It is usually a bad thing.