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Academic Governance and Academic Reform: Legitimacy and Energy

A thorough review and revision of the curriculum at San Jose State University illustrates that a modern university can achieve major internal academic reforms when two important conditions are met: legitimacy and energy. These two concepts are defined, and practical illustrations are drawn from SJSU's recent experience in trimming its curriculum from 280 to 190 degree programs.

Many critics openly doubt that universities are capable of serious internal reform. A variety of reasons are advanced for why this should be so—an influential Rand report (Benjamin et al., 1993) asserts that universities are too decentralized, too hierarchical, too consensual, and too complex, making "...inevitable the inability of institutions and systems to set priorities, focus missions, and implement choices among academic programs" (p. 28). A particular target of the critics is the proliferation of curricular programs and degrees. "Faculty members and administrators have expanded, even proliferated, programs and courses with entrepreneurial zeal. Often they have sought to tap any market or serve any constituency, at any place or any time" (Gaff, 1997, p. 12).

A recent success at San Jose State University (SJSU) suggests that the critics are too pessimistic about the prospects for universities to achieve major internal reforms. SJSU recently conducted an internal reallocation of resources, reducing the number of its degree programs from about 280 to approximately 190, in order to free resources for high priority programs. This process was internally initiated by the president and provost, included extensive faculty participation, and was ultimately vetted through the academic senate. While the SJSU model has limits that will be more fully examined, it nonetheless demonstrates that traditionally structured universities are capable of major academic reform. Local campus culture and the successful inter-

action of particular personalities played a major role in SJSU's successful reforms. This should discourage us from attempting to create a recipe-like formula for transport to different academic environments. However, we can identify two important principles that were crucial for our success, and that we suspect will be equally essential for other academic reform efforts. We call these two principles legitimacy and energy.

In an era when public cynicism and apathy toward political processes have reached epidemic proportions, it is not surprising that traditional academic governance has also been subjected to intense skepticism. The faculty senates, committees, and "shared governance" that comprise consensual decision-making at universities have been viewed as a "conservative force, slowing the rate of change, avoiding extremes, and protecting the pursuit of multiple goals and objectives" (Benjamin et al. 1993). We believe that the view of academic governance as inherently obstructionist neglects the very important contribution to reform that bodies such as academic senates can make—legitimacy. Legitimacy here is meant in the Weberian sense—simply that something is perceived and accepted as legitimate by those who are affected. The sense of legitimacy is vital for breaking down inertia and enabling significant reforms to take place. In contrast, faculty obstructionism seems to flourish where shared academic governance is weak. In such environments faculty are intensely motivated to undermine what they believe to be illegitimate decisions imposed by unpopular bureaucrats.

Critics of academic governance, however, seem to be on solid ground when they point out that senates and faculty committees do not always possess the courage, the expertise, or the speed to make the most difficult and time-sensitive decisions—particularly when the careers of colleagues or their academic legacies are at stake. Gaff (1997) points out that "nowhere are faculty members prepared to deal with strategic planning, constructing and monitoring budgets, assessing programs on a cost-benefit basis, or attending to public relations—all staples of running modern colleges and universities. The faculty were given responsibility but no preparation to exercise that responsibility" (p. 16). The combination of these sorts of qualities—decisiveness, forcefulness, even secrecy when necessary—approximate what Hamilton called energy in his famous description of good executive power in Federalist 70. From time to time, a ponderous process designed to produce legitimate and supportable decisions must receive an infusion of energy. That energy must be applied in such a way as to impel the process forward, but must not be so muscular that it preordains decisions and undermines legitimacy.

The Case of San Jose State University

As this article goes to press, San Jose State University is well underway in implementing the results of its "Academic Priorities" process. This sweeping effort for academic reform was born out of the California recession of the early 1990s. Over a six-year period budget cuts were annual affairs, ultimately resulting in the loss of 19% of our faculty and 13% of our students. But over the same period of time the number of academic programs continued to grow to a high of 280, resulting in a mismatch between the depleted faculty and the expanding curriculum. By 1997 there were 171

courses on the books that had not been taught in three or more years, and dozens of majors and concentrations that were graduating 0-9 students annually, making it extremely difficult to provide specialized courses with adequate enrollments.

In 1993 the Academic Senate approved and the President signed as policy the "Statement of Curricular Priorities." Developed by a senate committee over a period of two years, this document listed eight criteria that were to "guide any decision to add, expand, eliminate, consolidate, reduce, or review programs," and included such items as "centrality to mission," "quality of instructional program," "student demand," "societal need," and "effectiveness, viability, and efficiency," as well as explanations and specific criteria. Each criterion was further described with examples for application. While this document did not result in any immediate reforms, it provided a legitimate and a ready-made tool that was to be useful when a new administration launched a major reform effort.

A newly appointed president and provost, both from off-campus, initiated the "Academic Priorities" process in the fall of 1995. During his interview for the position and the six months following his appointment, the president had indicated his belief that the university had too many programs and needed to reduce the number. The intent was not an overall budget reduction but a commitment to determine priorities and use those as a basis for internal reallocations. He confirmed his commitment to this goal when, less than a month after the arrival of SJSU's new provost, the president announced that the provost would lead a review of all academic programs.

The provost first vetted a proposed outline of the process at an all-day Academic Senate retreat. The process was to pursue two major tracks. The first and most successful track was the development of a "Resource Allocation Plan" that reviewed the status of all 280 curricular programs with an eye toward shifting resources. Tiers of committees—departmental, collegiate, and then at the university level (Steering Committee) evaluated the university's 280 programs according to the previously developed criteria. The final committee (steering committee) was designed by the provost specifically to gain maximum standing from the university community. Its members included the chair of the senate, the chair of the senate's curriculum committee, the chair of the council of chairs, two deans, an administrator, a staff member, and three additional faculty. The second and less successful track utilized a separate task force (Redesign Task Force) to create a "Redesign Plan" for the restructuring of the academic units of the university.

All the recommendations derived from both tracks went to the academic senate for consultation in the spring of 1997. The precise relationship between senate action and the implementation of recommendations remained somewhat ambiguous, since the administration would technically have been free to implement plans regardless of senate action. However, the view at SJSU was that it would have been politically difficult to proceed with any recommendations that were sharply opposed by the senate. As it turned out, the senate gave its limited endorsement to the Resource Allocation plan. This plan had been produced through the elaborate tiered process that culminated with the steering committee, and recommended the reduction and consolidation of the

university's programs from over 280 to under 200. The separate redesign plan, which suggested some modifications to placement of departments within colleges and a variety of other structural issues, was not accepted by the Senate. The administration decided to move ahead with the resource allocation plan and not with the redesign plan.

Legitimacy

The Academic Priorities process began with many faculty harboring fears and misgivings. A few years earlier, San Diego State had undergone a divisive and much publicized battle in a clumsy effort to cut entire departments. Prospects were further clouded at SJSU by the low faculty morale that accompanies budget attrition, and by the uncertainty the campus felt with a mostly new administration. Given the situation, one might logically have anticipated active or passive resistance to the entire process. In fact there was such resistance from some quarters, such as one college committee that simply refused to participate as directed, but, as the process wore on, many fears were allayed. The SJSU administration surprised many by showing considerable respect for collegial governance and local academic culture, and faculty responded by cooperating in the largest overhaul of our curriculum ever attempted or accomplished. The academic priorities process was not, however, a complete success. The resource allocation component succeeded to a remarkable degree, but the redesign component met with very mixed results. Both outcomes can be explained in terms of legitimacy and energy, supporting the view that these two qualities are vital components of any substantive academic reform. However, the structure and process by which legitimacy and energy all ensured will likely vary across institutions.

At SJSU faculty cooperation depended upon the perception that the process was legitimate. For the reallocation plan, this was achieved in several ways. First, the provost personally visited each of the 52 departments to discuss the review and to explain the process to concerned faculty. As much as possible, the structure of the effort was designed to respect preexisting campus policies and collegial governance. The "curricular priorities" statement (described earlier) was affirmed—this effort was one designed to build on rather than replace the senate's work. In addition, the campus was assured that the academic senate would review the results and offer advice, which was a meaningful promise given that the new president was increasingly seen to rely on collegial governance. Finally, all programs were assured that the existing policy on program termination would be respected—that if programs were recommended for termination, they would be allowed to vigorously argue their case for survival at multiple levels prior to any decision becoming final.

Legitimacy was also achieved in terms of the selection of people to create the reallocation plan. On the one hand the tiered review of programs embraced a grassroots quality, with each department creating its own rationale for its curriculum and each of our eight colleges electing a review committee of faculty members to recommend priorities. There was some debate over whether this decentralized approach was needed, centering around the need for information from those most knowledgeable about the programs versus the difficulty of making objective decisions that directly

affect one's interests. We decided that the departments should begin the process by reviewing each program, recognizing that in most cases the department would advocate rather than evaluate. The colleges' committees, mostly elected by the faculty, were then asked to review the programs and place programs into categories for enhancement, maintenance, reduction or elimination. This compromise generally succeeded in assuring that departments felt that their merits had been legitimately voiced, although those that did not fare well in the reallocation did tend to be more critical of the process than those who did.

The creation of the key Steering Committee that wrote the final report was probably the trickiest matter in the whole process. The committee was appointed by the provost after consultation with senate leadership, and its composition had to be balanced in multiple dimensions. It included representatives of the senate, but also other key groups—most particularly deans. It included a representative with an outside perspective and a staff member, and was also mixed for gender and ethnicity. It was further mixed for intellectual background and college affiliation. In addition, the faculty involved were generally present or past elected campus leaders. As a result, the committee had some stature with most key campus constituencies. Students, however, were not represented on the committee. It was thought that the extremely demanding schedule (150 hours of meetings over 6 months) would preclude students from participation on the committee, although students did turn out in large numbers at the public hearings and made some decisive contributions.

Legitimacy of the reallocation plan was also secured by keeping the process open and as transparent as possible. Press conferences were held regularly, particularly for the campus media. Every program and faculty member was given ample time and opportunity to be heard, and most actively participated in the process at the department or college level. The steering committee received and read over 2,000 pages of documents that were generated by the review process. In addition, it met for hours at open hearings at the start and conclusion of the process to allow for oral testimony. All of this led to a senate debate, which was framed by a two-iteration Delphi survey of senate members completed prior to oral arguments.

It was vital that the actual procedures used by the steering committee be regarded as fair and impartial. Some faculty originally worried that the steering committee would simply implement the subjective preferences of its members in making key recommendations. This was avoided through several mechanisms. First, a culture of discourse was established within the committee that tended to favor arguments raised by members about programs outside their own college. In fact, each member was assigned to become an "expert" on a college removed from his or her own area of specialization. Second, to further reduce politicking, the steering committee kept its meetings open but its ballots secret. This made it much less likely for the faculty on the committee to divide into camps or factions, or to be pressured against betraying their own college interests. Third, since the committee learned a great deal by plodding through all 280 programs, it returned to the programs for a second pass. This made it possible to correct an early decision on one program that might have been overly harsh

or overly generous compared with a subsequent decision made with another program. Fourth, the committee exposed its data to public scrutiny and corrected it when flaws were identified. For example, student enrollment data were used, but after public criticism additional research was conducted to produce a more reliable and useful data set for the committee's use.

Faculty were not the only group who had to accept the resource allocation plan as legitimate. The deans of the various colleges would be key players in the implementation of any results that came out of the process. Some of them had expressed their view that faculty would never seriously address the task. By placing deans and faculty together on the steering committee a unique working relationship was formed that reassured the council of deans that their unique concerns would be addressed and their expertise utilized. The redesign plan, in contrast, suffered from compromised legitimacy. The effort was not without value—in future years any new effort to restructure the university can begin with a significant base of knowledge and creative alternatives. Equally important, the problems faced by the redesign task force very much helped the steering committee—numerous procedural reforms were adopted for the steering committee mostly in reaction to task force problems. But politicking on the task force damaged its legitimacy in the eyes of many faculty. In particular, the task force became embroiled in the controversy of the proper location for our ethnic studies programs—a dispute that divided the committee nearly in half and preoccupied its attention. Furthermore, several of the task force's members would have been directly and personally affected by several of the redesign options, and word spread that some individuals on the task force were lobbying with partisan abandon for their own interests. The final report of the task force reflected the overall problems it faced: it endorsed one configuration for the university, but a separate report that ultimately was signed by a majority endorsed a different configuration. Faced with these problems, the senate adopted a resolution that the report "should not be implemented."

Sending both reports to the senate for review and comment before submission to the administration for final decisions was crucial to the legitimacy of the effort but did carry certain risks. The steering committee had worked carefully and thoroughly for many long hours and reviewed enormous amounts of written material. It seemed unreasonable for the senate to revise this work based on a review of a summary document. The senate agreed to focus its review on the legitimacy and fairness of the process rather than on specific recommendations. Using this standard, the senate was led to its differing conclusions about the two reports, reflecting the superior legitimacy of the process that produced the resource allocation plan. The multiple levels of review and involvement of faculty who held leadership positions in the senate proved decisive.

Energy

A process may be legitimate and useless. In order to pursue a legitimate process that produces real results, a certain measure of Hamilton's "energy" needs to be supplied at key turning points. In the SJSU case, there were two crucial turning points when the administration supplied "energy" to help the reallocation process succeed.

The first came at the college level. When the college committees met to consider the department curricular reviews, they were directed to propose programmatic reductions of at least 5% of the college's budget and to recommend enhancements of no more than 10%. Initial responses varied from across the board cuts, to selective programmatic cuts, to no cuts at all. Follow-up from both the provost and the steering committee improved these responses, although colleges continued to vary in the quality of the reports they generated. While imperfectly implemented, the "5% mandate" nonetheless was responsible for many of the most useful (but painful) decisions coming out of the review.

The second injection of energy came at the steering committee level. After weeks of preliminary efforts, the chair of that committee asked the provost and the president to intervene with more specific instructions. They personally appeared before the committee and charged it to implement a "matrix" in which a certain number of programs, assigned by them, would be enhanced, reduced, and eliminated. Ultimately the committee modified the matrix, introduced greater complexity such as inclusion of a probationary category, and modified the numbers in the categories. But without the instructions the committee may not have succeeded in producing significant results.

These two injections of energy demonstrate that faculty and collegial groups can make tough decisions when the decision-making environment is properly framed. By giving a committee very clear, unambiguous, vigorously enforced instructions a task can be narrowed and choices highlighted. In so doing, it is important that the choices not be so constricted that a committee feels compelled to make particular choices, but that it indeed be constricted enough so as to force a choice from among a useful range of choices. SJSU's efforts might have succeeded even more had, with the benefit of hindsight, these instructions been even more specific and delivered even earlier in the process. But when they believe that their efforts are part of a legitimate, fair process, faculty will not turn away from a properly framed decision, even though it be an extraordinarily difficult one.

Deans are also not immune to the need for infusions of energy. One or two deans argued that the entire review could be concluded at the college level, but others expressed concern that some deans would be decisive and others would not and that the "tough" deans would lose the support of their faculty. It was evident that for the deans to provide energy to the process, it had to be a collective endeavor. Moving the decisions to the campus level provided checks and balances and protected day-to-day working relationships between deans and faculty.

Again, as a useful contrast, the redesign effort suffered from a lack of sufficiently focused energy. It never seemed feasible for the president or provost to intervene, as they did with the steering committee, and direct the task force to "cut the number of colleges from 8 to 4" or "expand the number of colleges so that each one forms a coherent community of scholars." Such intervention would dramatically have increased results, but probably only at the cost of legitimacy, since it would have strayed too far towards the preordination of a certain kind of outcome. But somehow the effort needed that kind of energy—key structural decisions needed to be agreed to and vetted before the campus prior to sorting out the specific locations of each program.

Conclusion

The success of the resource allocation plan seems to have been achieved through a careful balancing of the roles of academic governance and academic administration. The participation of the academic senate was critical in establishing legitimacy. The senate provided the criteria for evaluating programs, helped design the process, provided key leaders as participants, and, at the conclusion, endorsed the review as fair and thorough. The administrative involvement was essential in providing the energy needed to complete this difficult task. The academic administration defined the goals, set parameters for committee recommendations, selected deans to serve as participants, and made the final decisions. Senate leaders and university administrators worked together to interpret the results of the process to the campus and the community.

The success of the resource allocation plan was by no means unlimited—while it qualifies as a major reform it did not achieve structural changes. We cannot claim that this effort establishes that faculty can radically transform the nature of academic institutions—even if that were accepted as a desirable goal. Even so, the academic priorities process was a remarkable undertaking. The fact that some ninety academic programs could be discontinued or consolidated with the participation of faculty conclusively disproves the "faculty as obstructionist" myth.

Suggested Readings

Benjamin, Roger and Stephen Carroll, Maryann Jacobi, Cathy Crop, and Michael Shires, *The Redesign of Governance in Higher Education* (Santa Monica, CA: Rand, 1993).

Gaff, Jerry G., "The Changing Roles of Faculty and Administrators," *Liberal Education* (Summer 1997).