

## Faculty Governance in Challenging Times

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Let me start on a personal note: I was *Rektor* (or President) of Viadrina European University in Frankfurt (Oder)/Germany in the 1990s. Mine was an elected office, and I had to stand for re-election after my first four-year term was over. It was up to the university's Academic Senate to recommend (or *not* recommend) my re-election to the wider University Council, and when this item came up in the Senate, my faculty colleagues managed to fix the vote so that I was nominated with a majority of just one vote. For the minutes of the Senate, they annotated this result by saying that, while they thought I was doing great things for the university, they just didn't like my crazy American ideas about university governance.

I don't think that my ideas about university governance are all that crazy, but it was pretty obvious why my learned colleagues in Frankfurt (Oder), steeped as they still were in the German academic traditions of the almighty *Ordinarius*, felt somewhat uncomfortable with a president who was trying to give the university a bit more of a shape than the mere sum of its parts would have generated.

Not to worry: The University Council *did* re-elect me, with an overwhelming majority, but that experience has taught me never to take the relationship between faculty and a university's leadership for granted, and to see nursing that relationship as a continuing and important challenge. That was one of the reasons why I agreed to serve – at an age when I should have tended my rose bushes – a term as Academic Secretary.

Against this background, I would like to argue that higher education – in the United States as pretty much elsewhere – is facing some extraordinary challenges, and that successfully coping with these challenges will be yet another test for the involvement of the faculty in the governance of their universities – an involvement that may even have to go beyond the rather

successful example that the 50-year history of our current Senate has set and that is being rightly celebrated this year and today.

To make my point, let me single out – from a much larger universe of issues – three very different challenges that strike me as being particularly critical in today’s and tomorrow’s world of higher education; I am talking about

- the political contestation of knowledge,
- the threats to the open international environment of higher education, and
- the changes in students’ aspirations and choices.

I will add to this, in some concluding remarks, a few reflections on what I call, in some of my own writings on universities and without any malice, institutional ambivalence.

## Faculty governance in challenging times

### 1. The political contestation of knowledge

There is nothing profoundly new about the fact that the production, the diffusion, and the application of knowledge is subject to conflicting political assumptions; scholars both before and after Galileo had to find this out the hard way. What does seem to be new is both the intensity and the pervasiveness with which these conflicts have emerged in our times; our colleagues in environmental and genetic research, but also in the behavioral sciences, have many a tale to tell about this. In a more diffuse and perhaps even more pernicious development, many of our contemporary societies – ours very much included – display a remarkable resurgence of anti-intellectualism and, in its wake, a growing skepticism about the role and value of higher education; the Pew Research Center has striking data on this, as do some of the analyses of recent right-wing and populist movements in Europe; Poland and Hungary are disquieting cases in point, but not the only ones. As we know, a conspicuous streak of anti-intellectual sentiments runs through the cultural history of this country, as Richard Hofstadter has already documented in his 1963 book, and someone like the late William F.

Buckley Jr. could famously – or infamously – get away with the statement that he would “rather entrust the government of the United States to the first 400 people listed in the Boston telephone directory than to the faculty of Harvard University”. There is, however, growing evidence (Pew) to suggest that, if anything, the situation has escalated more recently and that key institutions of public enlightenment such as universities have come into the cross-hairs of the culture wars that are pervading this country.

If this is, indeed, the case, what does it have to do with academic governance? Quite a lot, I would argue, but perhaps most importantly, it underlines the need for us to pay much more explicit and critical attention to the nature of the phenomenon, to its driving forces and political strategies, and to the means of protecting the integrity of our intellectual labor from its more egregious transgressions; think of evolution or climate change or international security or school vouchers. I could very well imagine an Academic Senate devoting one of its more searching discussions to the political economy of anti-intellectualism and to the vulnerability of knowledge cultures in contemporary societies; this university could easily and productively marshal the expertise for such a debate.

## 2. The threats to the open international environment of higher education

Given my own biography, I may be particularly sensitive to this issue, but I *am* worried about indications that one of the most striking achievements in higher education over the last half century – its international opening – may be in jeopardy. This opening was a proud achievement indeed, allowing and sustaining an unprecedented migration of students, post-docs, and faculty among the international centers of scholarship, assisted by programs named after such luminaries as William Fulbright, Erasmus of Rotterdam, or George C. Marshall. These programs are continuing – my son was just awarded a Distinguished Fulbright Chair at the University of Birmingham – but my concern is of a different kind and a broader dimension. It has to do with the erosion of the international order that has emerged since WW II and, especially, since 1989, and with the impact that this erosion has on the openness of international scholarly migration. The escalating and increasingly intractable crisis in the Middle East, the sclerosis of the European integration process, the significance of a new Chinese

epicenter of scholarly cooperation, the growing contentiousness of immigration not only in this country, but in Britain, Poland, Germany and elsewhere, the ramifications of ever-expansive regimes of export limitation – all of these and other developments amount to a major threat to the kind of openness that the international system of international cooperation and exchange had so successfully acquired over the last 50 years.

Universities like Stanford, which have been both the engines and the beneficiaries of the open system of international intellectual exchange, will have to assume a major role in maintaining that system's openness against the encroachment of nationalist and other hegemonial aspirations in today's and tomorrow's world. This will call, in the halls of academic governance, for more attention to such issues as the admission, recruitment, and financial support of international students, their protection from overtly or covertly xenophobic threats, wherever they may come from, with a more active outreach effort of area studies programs, and with the continued strengthening of our universities' scholarly presence in other parts of the world, over and above the commendable, but limited role of overseas programs for undergraduates.

### 3. The changes in students' aspirations and choices

The third challenge that I want to address here has to do with the rather conspicuous shift in the intellectual and curricular choices that undergraduates at Stanford and other institutions make when it comes to choosing a major. As many of you know, our Senate's Planning and Policy Board (PPB) devoted, under the leadership of Russell Berman, a major effort to analyzing this phenomenon in 2016-17, and documented both the magnitude and the persistence of the shift from majors in the social sciences and humanities to engineering, notably computer science. To the extent that the data allow an interpretation, a great deal of that shift seems to have to do with parental and peer pressure in the context of concerns over future employability and remuneration, but also (it seems) with a certain reluctance on the part of academic fields to effectively and credibly manifest their rich identities, knowledge cultures, and career prospects.

The nature of the problem would seem to have any number of implications for the role of faculty and the tasks of faculty governance; let me mention three: (a) a more active

involvement of faculty in peer and parental discourses about curricular and life choices; (b) a more effective participation of faculty in the public discourse on the nature and both the intellectual and career opportunities of different fields; and (c) a more active role of faculty in both the recruitment of students and a more proactive orientation of applicants and entering students. Perhaps most importantly, the discourse on the future of a field's curriculum should not be limited to that field's faculty, but should be part of a university-wide process of reflection within the structures of faculty governance – the Senate and its committees – and include the active search for more curricular interactions with other fields.

## 2. The challenge of institutional ambivalence

Having started on a personal note, let me close on another personal note – and in the process add a final point to my diagnostic exercise:

Over the past 50 years, I have encountered academic governance at this university in three rather different incarnations. First, as a budding assistant professor at Stanford in the late 1960s, I watched with fascination from the sidelines how Herb Packer and his visionary cohort invented the faculty Senate as we now know it, coming as I did from a German university system where the faculty had preciously little to do with the governance of the university. Secondly, when I became an elected member of that Stanford Senate and of some of its committees in the 1970s and 1980s, I had a hands-on experience with how well this instrument lived up to the aspirations of its founders and to the needs of this university. Then, looking through a third and last window – the one that opened up in my role as Academic Secretary over the past three years – I found many of my earlier impressions confirmed, but also cause for some further reflections and scrutiny.

Over all of this, one thing that struck me perhaps more than anything else was a remarkable degree of what one might call unintended institutional ambivalence. This may come across as a bit of a heresy at an institution that is as spectacularly successful and self-assured as Stanford University, but I can't help but feel that oftentimes what makes us great as an institution is also what makes us vulnerable. Let me give you three examples of what I mean and let me suggest

that mastering this kind of ambivalence may well be the most profound challenge that academic governance faces as we move forward.

As an institution, we seem to have a very clear and distinct image of what makes us great. Among a few other things, we cherish competition, we cherish selection, and we cherish independence. What we seem to be less cognizant of, and perhaps less candid about, is the fact that some of the very traits that make us great also tend to make us vulnerable.

We do nurture, and take pride in, the competitive orientation of our students, our faculty, our staff, and we rightly attribute the intellectual success of the university to that kind of competition. At the same time, and notable exceptions to the contrary notwithstanding, we are much less cognizant of the downside of that competitiveness – of the mental, human, and more broadly intellectual cost of such fierce and persistent competition.

We also are, by very much the same token, a highly selective institution, and we are doing an amazing job refining and perfecting our instruments of selection – in the admission of students as in the recruitment and rewarding of our faculty. Unfortunately, however, we live in a society where – as Raj Chetty and his colleagues have shown – our very criteria of selectiveness are embedded in a set of very unevenly distributed social and demographic characteristics. This is a pattern that I know we are valiantly, and at considerable cost, trying to overcome, but as yet, as we also know, with less than full success.

Thirdly, we rightly and proudly cherish our institution's independence from outside interests in setting our own priorities in teaching and research. In many important respects, we *are* independent – much more so than the universities elsewhere that I have dealt with as a student or a university president or an advisor. But at the same time, we *do* depend on the world outside of academia for a great many and rather indispensable things: for the recognition and esteem of what we do, and for the legitimacy that is thereby conferred; for resources, both those altruistically given and those officially awarded; and for the goodwill and good humor of our neighbors in the face of shrinking space and ever more limited mobility.

From the start of this great university and through the 50-year history of the Faculty Senate, the faculty has had a key role in mediating these kinds of ambivalence – by including very much the

mental health and well-being of our students in its purview, by monitoring the intricacies and assumptions involved in admissions and financial aid, by paying special attention to the situation of first-generation students, by including in its concerns the source and the terms and the use of the institution's bounty, and by watching over the relationship with the university's neighbors, donors, supporters and critics.

This was and is as it should be, and as the Faculty Senate moves into the next 50 years of its history, the challenges of which I have spoken will require even more of that attention.