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From the issue dated February 6, 2009

## BALANCE OF POWER

### Downturn Threatens the Faculty's Role in Running Colleges

By ROBIN WILSON

Professors are losing their grip. Tough economic times are leading administrators to propose swift changes that short-circuit faculty governance, long a prized principle that gives professors wide-ranging authority over educational matters.

The results, faculty members say, are hastily conceived plans that reorganize academic programs, decrease professors' roles in shaping the curriculum, and jeopardize tenure applications — all done with little advice from the faculty, in the name of saving money.

The chancellor of the Tennessee Board of Regents, for instance, has proposed a plan to stress online education, hire more adjunct teachers, and put full-time faculty members in an "oversight" role. The University of South Florida's Tampa campus merged programs and shifted some faculty members to different schools in just six months. And Ohio University has a new academic plan that was, many professors charge, an end run around some of their own recommendations.

"A decline in resources has made administrators more interested in becoming independent movers and shakers," says Cary Nelson, president of the American Association of University Professors. He wants his organization to be more aggressive in investigating cases where administrators and boards leave professors out of the loop. "It is faculty members who have the expertise about disciplines," he says, "and if they don't have input, a university's academic integrity can be threatened."

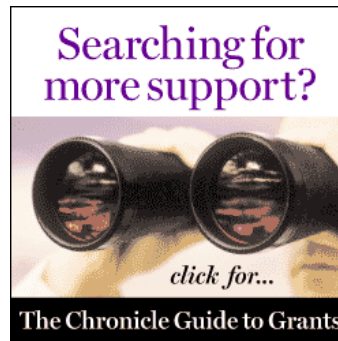
Administrators insist they do consult widely with professors, although they acknowledge they can't always spend months deliberating over a plan. Besides, they say, it is administrators who are held responsible by boards for whether a university thrives. And faculty senates — which have a reputation for being filled with disaffected professors — can be hard to work with.

Ralph C. Wilcox, provost of the University of South Florida, says he had to work fast. When he took the job in January 2008 he was immediately hit with a directive to cut spending. "In Florida, we have a state law that spells out quite clearly that it is the right and the responsibility of the public employer to determine unilaterally the organization and function of the university," he says.

#### Historic Role

The concept of faculty governance has been in place since the country's first universities were established, and the AAUP's writings on the concept date to 1920. Faculty governance gives professors not just a say but the predominant voice in such academic matters as hiring new colleagues, establishing the curriculum, and figuring out how much time faculty members should spend on research. It also gives professors a seat at the table when it comes to appointing administrators and preparing a university's budget.

The idea that workers, in this case faculty members, should have a major and sometimes the dominant role in an organization's management is unusual. The concept is "founded upon the assumption that faculty are not merely employees, but professionals with special training and knowledge," says a 2007 statement written by Gregory F. Scholtz, who directs the AAUP's department of academic freedom, tenure, and governance. Both the American Council on



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Education and the Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges have agreed.

The concept, however, hasn't always translated into reality on individual campuses. In one of the higher-profile clashes lately, the provost of Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute announced in August 2007 that administrators would no longer recognize the Faculty Senate there because it had amended its rules to allow voting by those who were not on the tenure track. Professors are still working to try to reconstitute the senate and regain recognition.

Gary Rhoades, the new executive director of the professors' association, says friction between faculty members and administrators is likely to grow. "In so many cases, faculty feel administrators are making decisions without consulting them," he says. "That is going to become the case now more than ever, with administrators saying, 'We don't have time to consult. Because of the economic challenges we're facing, we have to act quickly.'"

That is precisely what some believe Charles W. Manning, chancellor of the Tennessee Board of Regents, was thinking when in late November he issued a "new business model" for the system's six universities and 13 community colleges. The plan, which faculty members had never seen before Mr. Manning unveiled it, asks the Tennessee board to consider sweeping changes. The reason? The system is facing close to a 20-percent reduction in state funds over two years.

Mr. Manning's plan (see chart above) would offer cut-rate tuition to undergraduates who agreed to take courses online "with no direct support from a faculty member." The proposal calls for full-time professors to assume an "oversight" role as the university employs more adjuncts and asks advanced students to start teaching beginning students. It says that, in general, the university system should consider "abandoning some of the ingrained structures that restrict our approach."

Mr. Manning asked professors and administrators to submit "a summary of your thoughts" about the proposal, which he said he hoped the board would act on by this spring.

When faculty members saw the plan they balked. "I agree that this economic situation is difficult, and we may need to be thinking outside the box," says Alfred Lutz, president of the Faculty Senate at Middle Tennessee State University. "But our thinking should not be beyond the pale." Mr. Lutz says the chancellor's proposal strikes at the heart of the way higher education has traditionally operated, and its language about "abandoning ingrained structures" poses a threat to academic freedom and tenure. "I don't think I've ever seen anything quite like this," he adds.

In an interview, Mr. Manning acknowledged that the faculty's reaction to his plan had been "extreme." He now says the plan "was never intended to be brought to the board for action." But the board has already begun discussing it, and the chancellor said he wanted faculty members and others to comment by March 1.

"This is fantastically quick turnaround for a system as large as ours," says Nathan Garner, an associate professor of computers and information systems at Cleveland State Community College, in Tennessee.

Timing was a chief complaint last year when administrators at the University of South Florida pushed through a sweeping reorganization in just six months. Professors say the university's new provost never formally submitted his plan to its Faculty Senate. Instead, they say, he relied on deans and department chairs to get the word out to professors. As a result, faculty members say some of them were extensively involved and some barely knew what was happening before the changes took place last summer.

"The process rubbed a lot of nerves raw," says Sherman Dorn, president of the USF chapter of the United Faculty of Florida, a union affiliated with the American Federation of Teachers. "It left a lot of faculty very skeptical and distrusting." The provost's plan was fueled by the need to cut \$52-million and included reorganizing the College of Arts and Sciences, creating a new college, and downsizing the support staff for programs including the Institute on Black Life, Africana studies, the Institute for the Study of Latin America and the Caribbean, and women's studies.

Mr. Dorn says fallout from the swift reorganization has left some junior professors hanging. They found their tenure committees, which had been constituted before the reorganization took place, composed of senior professors who were no longer even in the same college. In other cases, junior professors moved to different colleges with new deans. "Which is the dean who makes the tenure decision?" asks Mr. Dorn, "the new dean or the old one?"

It has taken awhile for department chairs to help junior professors figure out the details. Some of that uncertainty might have been avoided, says Mr. Dorn, if the university had moved more slowly and involved more professors up front.

A half-dozen faculty members filed a grievance with administrators about the reorganization process at South Florida, but the Faculty Senate is now working with administrators on a "memorandum of understanding" that sets out a procedure for how the faculty should be involved in developing any future reorganization plans.

Mr. Wilcox, the provost, says he and his deans "had extensive, broad, and deep consultation with the faculty," including at public hearings on the campus. Some professors, he says, have been quite pleased with the reorganization — including those in science and mathematics who helped shape a new School of Science. But Mr. Wilcox concedes that the memorandum the Faculty Senate is establishing with new procedures is a good idea. "It has been a good lesson learned that we had no such guidelines," he says.

### 'They Want More Power'

At Ohio University, it is not just the president's new academic plan that has set off faculty members. Professors and administrators there have been at odds for nearly a decade as the university has seen a steady decline in state funds.

Professors charge that the number of administrators has ballooned in that time, and that university leaders have plowed money into athletics facilities, coaches' salaries, and perks for administrators. Meanwhile, they say, faculty salaries have barely budged, and professors have been asked to pay more for health care.

"This has been a long, drawn-out process that has kept pushing the faculty more and more to say: The system is broken, we can't trust the administration, and they won't listen to us," says Joseph Bernt, a Faculty Senate representative and a professor of journalism at Ohio University. Professors have grown so disenchanted that they revived a campus chapter of the AAUP and are now trying to start a union.

Roderick J. McDavis, the university's president, started the process of adopting a new academic plan — called Vision Ohio — in 2004. Faculty members believe the many ad hoc committees he appointed to review the plan side-stepped the Faculty Senate. The ad hoc committees included faculty members but, in the end, it was the administration's own vision that prevailed, says Kevin Uhalde, an associate professor of history and president of the campus's AAUP chapter.

"We spent tons of time talking, but the same plan that the administration walked in with is what they went out with," says Mr. Uhalde, who served on some of the ad hoc panels. "Everything else sort of disappeared."

Kathy A. Krendl, provost of Ohio University, suspects that the Faculty Senate is upset because, while its members were involved in Vision Ohio, the senate "wasn't the only voice" and "it wasn't in charge." Now, she says, the senate has passed a series of resolutions on faculty compensation, health benefits, and faculty governance that she has refused to sign because, she says, they had little to do with academic issues and more to do with "advocacy." She believes professors who are part of the senate have passed the series of resolutions because "they want more power back."

### Professors At Fault?

Some faculty members agree. "While the rest of the campus was engaged in rethinking and reshaping the university mission ... our Faculty Senate was focused on protecting its turf," says Don M. Flournoy, a former dean at Ohio University and a professor of media arts and studies there. "In my opinion, shared governance on this campus has become nothing more than a euphemism for faculty control."

Merrill P. Schwartz is doing a study of faculty governance for the association of governing boards, which represents campus trustees and chief executives. It will look at examples of "best practices" in how board members, professors, and administrators work together.

Ms. Schwartz says professors may, in part, be responsible for the breakdown in faculty governance on some campuses. In general, she says, professors have become more focused on their research and less involved in helping to run their universities. That's decreased the faculty's voice in decision making and contributed to a decline in communication between professors and administrators.

And less talk can be dangerous in times like these. "If there isn't a good system on a campus for consultation and communication, this climate is going to make that clear," says Ms. Schwartz, who directs research at the association of governing boards. "Good communication builds trust and good will, which are essential when difficult decisions need to be made in a short amount of time."

*Next: New legal challenges to academic freedom*

### TENNESSEE CONSIDERS SHRINKING FACULTY ROLES

The chancellor of the Tennessee Board of Regents has offered a plan that redefines professors' responsibilities. Here are some features:

- "Discounted tuition to students who expect to work online with no direct support from a

faculty member. ... "

- "Formalize a system that anticipates even greater use of adjuncts. ... "
- "Build into students' curriculum and into financial aid that advanced students are expected to assist beginning students. ... "
- "Reconceptualize faculty workload, moving away from defining it in terms of numbers of courses taught. ... "

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