

A controversy over who gets to make policy and how much power trustees should wield at the University of Kentucky is roiling the campus.

The dispute revolves around the composition and efficiency of the University Senate, a body of faculty and staff members, students, and administrators; two-thirds of its members are professors. While no formal proposal to remake the senate has yet been made, faculty members have criticized the process that has unfolded thus far — particularly an analysis by a working group and the consulting firm Deloitte — as rushed, incomplete, and shaped in a way that casts shared governance as bloated, inefficient, and endowing professors with too much control. Kentucky’s president, in turn, said he’s executing trustees’ policies and that the current makeup of the senate shuts out too many voices.

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For now, faculty members have asked the president, Eli Capilouto, who is due to propose changes at the end of the month, to pause the process. Capilouto plans instead to forge ahead in order to meet a mid-summer deadline imposed by Kentucky’s Board of Trustees.

The senate’s leader, DeShana Collett, [said this week](#) that Capilouto “continues to fail to offer sufficient data or analysis to justify the changes to our governance structure that we are bracing for.” At its best, Collett and other faculty leaders said, the shared-governance evaluation is an attempt to fix something that’s not broken. At its worst, they fear an abrogation of faculty power that could result in board overreach.

Capilouto, meanwhile, has maintained that he'll preserve faculty members' authority on academic matters and that changes are necessary to ensure that all voices — particularly those of staff members — are heard.

Stirrings of shared-governance changes began in the fall of 2023, when Kentucky's Board of Trustees introduced a plan to examine institutional priorities. Called Project Accelerate, the plan formed work groups to study each of five areas in which the university [is expected to](#) make “significant progress” by June 2024.

In late February, the working group focused “more responsiveness” made its [presentation](#) to the trustees, contending that Kentucky's governing regulations are exceptional in that they do not “outline the areas in which authority can be exercised, or explicitly limit the authority given to the University Senate” or grant its board or administration input on educational policy. In allowing that latitude, the group found, the university differs from 25 other institutions, including its fellow members of the Southeastern Conference — excluding Vanderbilt University, a private institution — seven peer institutions that also have schools in agriculture, engineering, medicine, and pharmacy on a single, [contiguous campus](#), and the other public institutions in the Commonwealth of Kentucky. None of the other institutions, the group found, afforded senate bodies authority over admissions standards, as Kentucky does.

It's also worth asking whether the shared-governance policies of the institutions to which Kentucky is being compared are truly superior, said Demetri L. Morgan, an associate professor of higher education at Loyola University Chicago. “Just because Kentucky is an outlier does not mean that what they're being compared to is the benchmark or the gold standard, or that the other institutions are doing it right.”

In fact, given some of the governance-related crises that have transpired at other SEC colleges — such as the University of Florida and [Texas A&M University](#) — Morgan said, one could argue that Kentucky's current shared-governance setup has been a

“bulwark” of sorts. “Why would the University of Kentucky want to be going through what the University of Florida has gone through in the last five years?”

The working group also said that the length of Kentucky’s senate rules — clocking in at 305 pages — is a “total exception” among the peer institutions it studied; the majority of those documents, it found, were under 35 pages. The American Association of University Professors doesn’t have any recommended lengths for governance documents, said Mark Criley, senior program officer in the association’s department of academic freedom, tenure, and governance. Still, he said, “merely pointing at the regulations and saying that they’re 305 pages long doesn’t mean that they’re too long or need to change. It seems sort of beside the point.” Part of the discrepancy between the length of Kentucky’s documentation and other colleges’, Criley added, could be because of a difference in what those policies focus on. Where Kentucky’s senate rules take up many policy questions, he said, other institutions may cover that ground in other materials, like faculty handbooks.

Procedural Concerns

On the same day that the work group reported its findings last month, the board passed a [resolution](#) giving Capilouto the task of recommending policy changes that “define and clearly articulate a shared governance structure that is in greater alignment with institutional benchmarks and that clearly recognizes the board’s primacy as the institution’s policymaking body.” The president is due to produce those recommendations by the end of March, with a feedback period to follow.

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nature of higher education in the United States very considerably.”

The resolution met with swift backlash. The campus chapter of the AAUP and the statewide United Campus Workers union warned in a [joint letter](#) that “the fate of our university curricula, programs, and much more could be determined by appointed administrators with little expertise in the areas they are tasked with administering.” And in a pair of its own resolutions, the Senate Council — the body’s executive committee — sounded the alarm, with Collett, the chair, in a message to the faculty [predicting](#) the senate’s “probable diminishing authority.”

The Senate Council has urged Capilouto to press pause on what Collett called a “false emergency” created by the board’s timetable. Capilouto disputed the characterization of the process as rushed. “I wouldn’t call it an emergency,” he said in an interview with *The Chronicle*. “I just think it’s an urgency to engage. And we’ve done it respectfully, deeply, intentionally. Why not have these conversations now?”

Collett and other Senate Council members have also contested the means by which the work group arrived at its solutions. Collett said she was never formally consulted about the senate’s operations and that neither Capilouto nor other administrators had previously come to her with concerns about the senate’s efficacy or efficiency. She told *The Chronicle* that she was only briefed on the presentations two days before they took place. (A university spokesperson disputed this.)

“If anyone had a problem, how come nobody’s brought it up before now? How come this is all of a sudden new to me?” Collett said. “No one came to my office and Senate Council and said, ‘We want to see how efficient you are.’”

Hubert O. (Hubie) Ballard, one of two faculty representatives to the Board of Trustees, said the goal is not to dismantle the University Senate but to grant more curricular decision-making authority at the college level. He said he’s heard from constituents

that conflicting views are “not respected, and frequently not acknowledged,” by the University Senate, a characterization that Collett denied. That’s part of the reason why, in his first board meeting as a trustee, Ballard voted in support of the resolution directing Capilouto to recommend changes. (The only vote against that resolution came from the other faculty trustee, Hollie Swanson, who did not respond to a request for comment from *The Chronicle*.)

Also at issue for Collett and her colleagues is the makeup of the [work group](#), which is led by Kentucky’s treasurer and its vice president for research and includes one representative each from the University Senate, Staff Senate, and Student Government Association. The University Senate representative, whom Collett nominated, is the sole full-time faculty member in the work group. Its work, faculty critics said, has lacked transparency and resulted in “weak data.” While faculty critics have called for the release of a full report from the work group, Jay Blanton, a university spokesman, said none would be forthcoming, and that the work groups had come to a collective decision about how data and findings would be managed. A Deloitte spokesperson declined to discuss the firm’s work with Kentucky, citing “confidentiality obligations to our clients.”

The work group’s presentation to the board, though, offers some insight into its approach. A “question bank” used in its interviews with faculty and staff members and administrators asked participants whether the university’s existing policies “work effectively to achieve the missions of [their] unit” and what participants would “suggest UK do to improve its ability to respond in a timely manner to internal and external pressures.”

Capilouto told *The Chronicle* that the process he’s engaged in — which included a two-week [listening tour](#) — also unearthed a need for greater staff representation on the University Senate. Staff members, he said, “are on the front lines of many of the things we do. While they may be invited in for a comment, in University Senate, which

has some pretty deep authority in establishing educational policy, they are not voting members.”

While Kentucky’s Staff Senate and Student Government Association both advise Capilouto, the University Senate, which consists mainly of faculty members, does hold additional sway. (In addition to its 94 faculty members, the University Senate includes 30 administrators — most of whom rotate voting rights — and 19 students. The leaders of the Staff Senate and Student Government Association sit on the Senate, and some rank-and-file staff members have seats on committees created by the Senate.)

The faculty presence can feel overpowering, said Justin Sumner, a web content specialist at the university and longtime member of the Staff Senate. “The University Senate, to us, is the Faculty Senate,” he said.

The Broader Climate

In contesting potential changes to the senate’s role, some faculty members have invoked recent [sweeping program cuts](#) at West Virginia University. They worry that disempowering the senate could set the stage for large-scale program discontinuations and layoffs without meaningful input from faculty. Capilouto dismissed those concerns, saying that West Virginia faced a multimillion-dollar-budget deficit that was partly brought about by declining enrollment. Kentucky is in no such position, he said, with stable state support and [record enrollment numbers](#).

Also playing into faculty fears about potential changes to shared governance is the broader political climate, both in Kentucky — where one House bill now in committee seeks to [codify post-tenure review](#) and another [takes aim at “discriminatory concepts”](#) — and nationwide. “I think it leaves us more open to outside influence, to political influence over curricular matters. It leaves us vulnerable to future presidents and future boards and future administrators who have a vision for the University of Kentucky that maybe isn’t what faculty see as the best thing for our students,” said

Molly T. Blasing, an associate professor of Russian studies and a Senate Council member.

To Morgan, at Loyola, that's a legitimate concern. The work group's presentation suggests a tilting of scales toward the board and the consolidation of power in fewer hands, a move that's [become popular](#) among the academic right in recent years. "This is right in the playbook," he said, of the "conservative think-tank apparatus that is looking for ways to redesign and conform universities."

Meanwhile, Kentucky faculty members find themselves in a sort of limbo as they wait for Capilouto to issue his recommendations (the president declined to comment to *The Chronicle* on specific changes he might recommend). Philipp W. Rosemann, head of the AAUP campus chapter at Kentucky, said there's ample time to reverse course, but he warned of the broader implications of a loss of faculty power at Kentucky.

"The University of Kentucky is not this small, 1,000-student liberal-arts college somewhere in the middle of nowhere. It is a major land-grant university," he said. "If things develop in a certain direction at the University of Kentucky, it could certainly encourage other universities to implement similar reforms that would then change the nature of higher education in the United States very considerably."

Correction (March 15, 2024, 11:34 p.m.): A previous version of this article mischaracterized the role and voting rights of some staff members on the University Senate. Some administrators sit on the Senate, and rank-and-file staff members serve primarily on Senate-created committees.

We welcome your thoughts and questions about this article. Please [email the editors](#) or [submit a letter](#) for publication.

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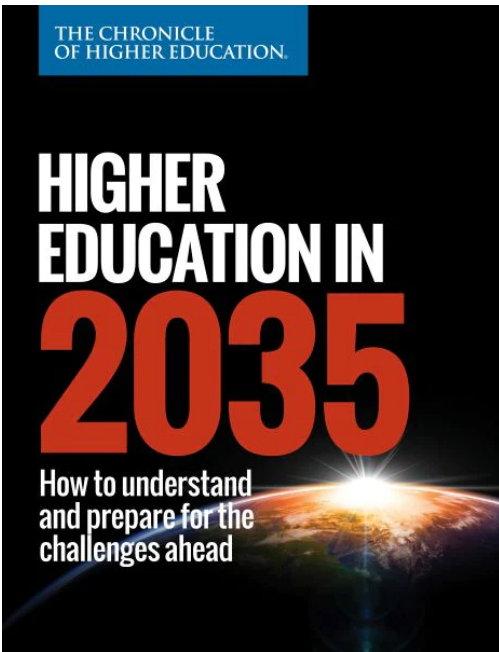
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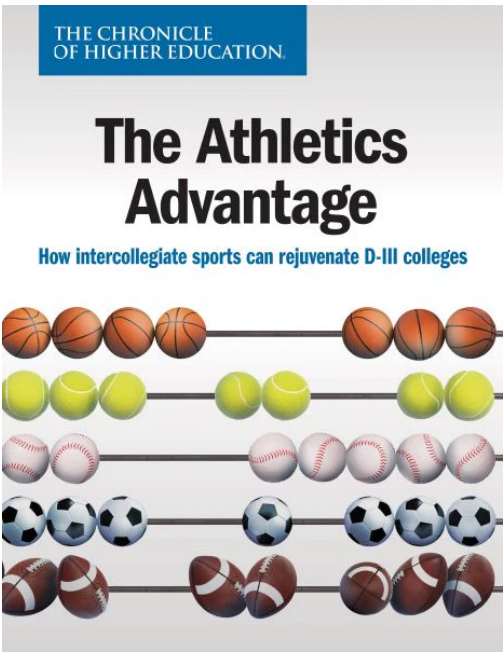
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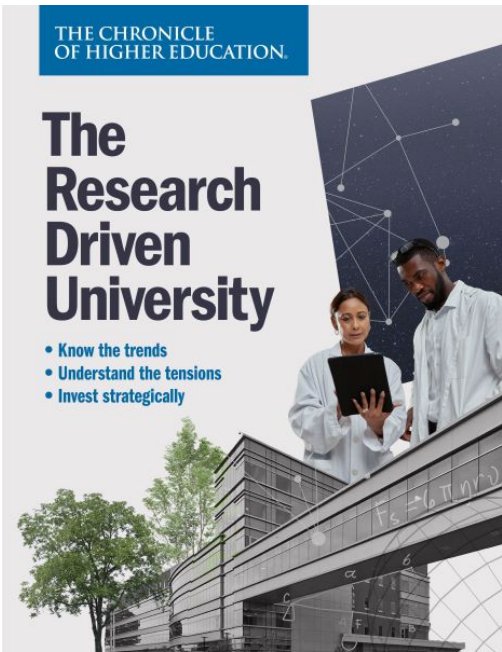
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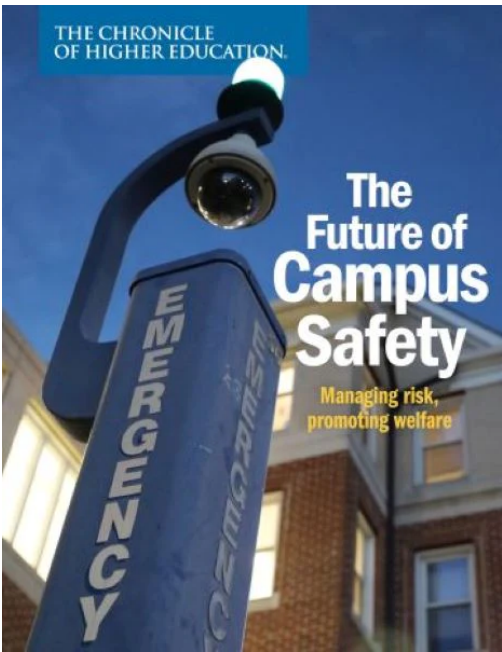
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