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INTERVIEW | EDUCATION & YOUTH

Administrators Are Trying to Strip Decision-Making Power From Faculty

Scholar DeShana Collett discusses the threats to shared governance at her university and, by extension, other schools.

By Bertin M. Louis Jr. & Reshmi Dutt-Ballerstadt, TRUTHOUT
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A building is pictured at the University of Kentucky in Lexington, Kentucky.

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The 2023-2024 academic year has already been very challenging for institutions of higher learning. In the midst of [college closures](https://www.insidehighered.com/news/business/financial-health/2024/04/10/goddard-college-announces-closure?utm_campaign=IHESocialEditorial&utm_content=goddard+college+announces&utm_medium=Social&utm_source=facebook&fbclid=IwAR2qjvWB921AniABf2kGanZScJqCWPmrDA-BtNFZzUhPEM2Lws27QZGrXKs_aem_AZrQl34_WVDoasDmlJCgNQ29dJqHDFd-zMv_NZqPxxwUfiqzgL3qJfzLPVgEqYbABRLfY3aW5Ucgr2Olek1mR3s), the [firing of tenured faculty members](https://www.chronicle.com/article/the-gutting-of-the-liberal-arts?sra=true&fbclid=IwAR1LoRgHfjOQq9xPQyPKUQkoGsDtzVr1GsCFO8rFSAfm-7HW6Eb5p6UM8o_aem_AZq3i0kWhljoCZz5Clo4kEpBsXoIEd04CZ7xOeuju6XTc4ZkitNaNE1Ve2SiiOwgBX7dHqDZ35Cg7cHTprAg), [politically motivated bans of diversity, equity and inclusion \(DEI\) offices and programs](https://www.dallasnews.com/news/education/2024/04/09/ut-dallas-lays-off-staff-closes-office-to-comply-with-dei-ban/?fbclid=IwAR2qjvWB921AniABf2kGanZScJqCWPmrDA-BtNFZzUhPEM2Lws27QZGrXKs_aem_AZrQl34_WVDoasDmlJCgNQ29dJqHDFd-zMv_NZqPxxwUfiqzgL3qJfzLPVgEqYbABRLfY3aW5Ucgr2Olek1mR3s), [academic program cuts](https://apnews.com/article/west-virginia-university-student-union-budget-cuts-139c2e5c638e009555c3c19c17caf5dd?fbclid=IwAR3VlwSxhW58z9yMcju58WISnHrRlflkrZqoEHsg07y6qnpjpcXNhwll7M_aem_AZr0652WnWmF9bvoFh9OHkvMaLd4xuvBXiRXTDoKiXz4xs_Q31xqRBDcZQhcBepEosLeMQlX) at public universities, [attacks on faculty](https://truthout.org/articles/scholars-should-be-able-to-speak-out-against-genocide-without-fear-of-punishment/) and [students](https://truthout.org/articles/gaza-solidarity-encampment-regroups-following-arrest-of-108-students-at-columbia/) protesting the war on Gaza, and attacks on [Black faculty members](https://donmoynihan.substack.com/p/open-season-on-scholars-of-race?fbclid=IwAR1BypBrfzvINxZEuuAluXujALc6K5vCf5y_L-DDfkIGUk4ZGRnPxCKP4_aem_AZoa06KXDyKRcdPAToHalWRUnLSDldGURaFaNCr6GYjv_SAceWv9Su2g6dBjrNbAd5ysNWf8Ut6lCTsxeMeNdx) for anonymous claims of plagiarism and research misconduct, there is an additional trend which is contributing to the erosion of higher education as we know it: reducing or eliminating shared governance.

The American Association of University Professors (AAUP), an organization which advances academic freedom and other professional values for university faculty and other academic professionals in higher education, refers to [shared governance](https://www.aaup.org/sites/default/files/AAUP_shared_governance.pdf) as “the responsibility shared among the different components of the institution — governing boards, administrations, and faculties — for its governance, and the specific areas of primary responsibility for each component.” The University of Kentucky (UKY) is one of the latest institutions to face an attack on shared governance. Recently, UKY President Eli Capilouto released a draft of principles that would, in effect, [dissolve the university senate](https://www.insidehighered.com/news/faculty-issues/shared-governance/2024/03/28/kentucky-president-proposes-strip-faculty-bodys) and replace it with advisory groups. A move of this nature would transfer the faculty-dominated body’s educational policy-making power to the board of trustees and the president.

We recently spoke with [DeShana Collett, Ph.D., PA-C](https://www.uky.edu/chs/dagrav0), chair of the [UKY university senate council](https://www.uky.edu/), about threats to faculty, staff and student shared governance at her institution. Collett is a tenured professor and also serves as the chair of the National Board of Commissioners for the Accreditation Review Commission on Education for the Physician Assistant (ARC-PA).

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Bertin M. Louis Jr. and Reshmi Dutt-Ballerstadt: Shared governance has been eroding in many universities and colleges across the country. Can you elaborate as to what is taking place at UKY with the board of trustees vote and president's proposed plan to curtail the university Senate's powers?

DeShana Collett: It's disheartening because at the heart of academia are the faculty, staff and students that we serve. For the administration to neutralize the decision-making authority of the senate without any conversation with senate members makes me question the intentions of leadership. The senate develops and maintains educational policy and ensures that UKY is compliant with [SACSCOC](https://sacscoc.org/) (the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges) to make sure that we are meeting standards. However, with President [Eli] Capilouto's proposed plan, the power of the senate will be negated, which may threaten the process of ensuring academic integrity.

This is deeply unsettling. They [the board of trustees and the president] do not have a clear understanding of how these decisions will impact academic integrity, excellence and freedom. Making decisions based on information that lacks quality data and analysis should be concerning.

The effects of this top-down approach could potentially impact what faculty are allowed to teach in their classrooms. For instance, if the dean were to say, "I don't want the faculty to include any content or discuss issues related to health disparities" or "You need to eliminate certain information out of your lectures, syllabus, or other class content," this type of action would be a violation of academic freedom. If faculty have barriers to their pedagogical discourse and cannot teach what they are trained to teach, it could have an impact on our livelihoods, promotion, tenure and merit raises.

There are many consequences when we don't have checks and balances in place, which is why we have a university senate (to balance the authority of the administration and board of trustees). The senate has never told any instructor that they can't teach a particular type of content.

How do the actions of the president, with his recent announcement of proposing transitioning the university senate to a faculty senate and a staff senate that are in an advisory role, affect shared governance (meaning that a faculty senate and a staff senate would just have advisory power instead of the university senate, which has checks and balances power in relation to the administration and board of trustees)?

I had a colleague mention this to me the other day — it is institutional betrayal. The president stated that the university senate is a university senate only in name and other campus voices [staff voices and student voices] needed to be heard. However, he separates each group of constituents, thus making it no longer a university senate but rather a faculty senate that is in an advisory role.

There could be significant consequences with this type of structure. An example would be if the dean of a college determines that the courses offered in a liberal arts studies or social sciences department are in less demand and the administration decides to do away with those courses. What is the impact on our students? We should also come from a principle of “student first.”

Maybe this is a financial issue. The general consensus has been that many universities have moved to function more like corporate businesses. Yes, we’re teaching students, but it is about putting more people in seats. And so, if the senate becomes an advisory body, I believe you will have less engagement because faculty will not feel as though their voice is valued by the administration and board of trustees. As a faculty member, how would it make me feel to dedicate time and effort to areas of importance only to be told, *Thank you, but we really don’t care about your evidence or your opinion?* If I don’t have a vote, I don’t have a voice, right? Now the faculty, staff and students are in an advisory role. I have spoken with the president on many occasions and offered him several examples of how we could expand the university senate to include more voting voices, such as more students and staff. However, I don’t believe administration has been receptive to a true shared governance structure that is inclusive of all.

As a result of these proposed changes, I think academic freedom and integrity could be in jeopardy. What if you propose a course that may be considered controversial? What will be the process to ensure academic rigor? Who will decide, if not the university senate, which is composed of a diverse body of constituents? We’ve seen the erosion of shared governance at other universities. This type of change means advisory roles instead of roles that reflect true shared governance. Being in an advisory position is not collaborative. By stripping the decision-making authority of the senate, who create and implement educational policies, you are increasing centralized power and authority.

University staff who’ve felt that they’ve been in an advisory role in the university senate still won’t have a voice because the power differential for them is very different than it is for you and me. They are more susceptible to retaliation such as termination versus faculty who have tenure. Staff are in a precarious situation, even in an advisory role.



DeShana Collett, Ph.D., PA-C, chair of the University of Kentucky senate council.

Do you think that these types of changes could lead to the elimination of faculty members and departments?

Yes. The president's draft proposal will make faculty in the department and at the college level advisory. This means a dean has the ability to stop any item from progressing forward and a dean will have the ability to close a program without the vote of the faculty.

Without the senate, faculty, staff and students in smaller departments will be the most vulnerable and that should be very concerning.

Has there been any discussion about a vote of no confidence for the president within the senate, and should that be the next step?

Many have questioned the sincerity of the president's actions. I have heard from constituents and read many opinion pieces highlighting whether the president is acting in the best interest of the students, staff and faculty. Many feel they haven't been heard or their legitimate concerns have been ignored. It would be up to the university faculty to determine their confidence level in the president and the board of trustees.

Can you offer any advice related to shared governance for people at other universities and colleges? What are some lessons they could learn from what's happening at UKY?

I would recommend that people at other institutions learn more and get involved with their shared governance organizations, such as the senate and AAUP chapters. Get the faculty, staff and students to understand the true meaning of shared governance. They should expect transparency and accountability from the administration. Because once you lose shared governance, it will be hard to get that back. And I think we're at that point at this university. The accountability and transparency are gone.

For people at other institutions, I recommend that they support the leaders who are speaking on their behalf. Stand by them and be ready to be at the call when it's needed. Genuinely learn and be knowledgeable about what is going on at your university and how what is happening affects not only you, but your other colleagues. People sometimes get very siloed in their own departments. "It's not going to affect me, so I don't really care" is the type of attitude university employees and students want to avoid developing.

Think about the consequences that can occur. Changes like these can have a significant impact on a person's livelihood.

It can have a negative impact on the recruitment and retention of employees, faculty and students, as well as negatively impacting academic freedom and academic excellence.

The university senate is responsible for upholding academic standards, designing assessments and evaluating student performance. Having voting responsibilities in educational policy decisions related to curricular development and accreditation processes is *essential* to maintaining academic integrity. But I feel the current steps to diminish the

meaningful voice of faculty increasingly erode their morale.

We want to feel valued and respected. It motivates us in our teaching, our research and our service. That leads to retention.

But as a faculty member, it would be challenging to work at a university that is a corporation where we are being told by the upper administration and the board of trustees what to teach, who to hire, and what research we can do.

What are your final comments or thoughts that you want to make sure other people hear about this situation?

Get educated on what is happening at your institution. What is happening here is not just at this university. This is a trend. It could be coming to your university or institution. We're seeing it happen and we're seeing a lot of political influence that is causing some of this too. We've seen it in Florida and elsewhere (<https://www.aaup.org/news/aaup-votes-sanction-new-college-florida-and-spartanburg-community-college>). I hope in the very near future that we start seeing our accreditation agencies advocate and intervene when it relates to the erosion of shared governance. SACSCOC and the Department of Education have more power and authority to hold institutions accountable.

I don't see the pace of this trend slowing down, just as we've seen votes of no confidence against university leaders increasing (https://www.forbes.com/sites/michaelnietzel/2024/04/07/no-confidence-vote-in-president--provost-looms-at-indiana-university/?sh=474e0a15350d&fbclid=IwAR37jGp-FgWeE14v9FeAvMYfdCjHzNHmIT9IQr2bOq0l43FF3TjF4b4TQTw_aem_AZp2jYB5xbYQDTUBSsKmEvXXbOh4oC0poYKt5cDokIGIB_etLGBP8bEauXd8DHjZgf7wT0emP37nRAoStc).

Safeguards need to be put in place at your college or university.

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Bertin M. Louis Jr. is an associate professor of anthropology and African American & Africana studies at the University of Kentucky. He is president of the [Association of Black Anthropologists](https://aba.americananthro.org/) (<https://aba.americananthro.org/>), past editor of *Inside Higher Ed's* column for marginalized faculty called "[Conditionally Accepted](https://www.insidehighered.com/users/conditionally-accepted)" (<https://www.insidehighered.com/users/conditionally-accepted>), and a regular contributor to *Higher Ed Jobs* (<https://www.higheredjobs.com/articles/default.cfm?auth=761>). Louis is also the author of *My Soul is in Haiti: Protestantism in the Haitian Diaspora of the Bahamas* (2015) (<http://nyupress.org/books/book-details.aspx?bookId=11993#U0v-aXWHwl>).

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