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A Major Blow to Shared Governance at the University of Kentucky

Guest Blogger / June 18, 2024

BY PHILIPP W. ROSEMANN

On June 14, 2024, the Board of Trustees of the University of Kentucky followed President Eli Capilouto's recommendation to approve a number of fundamental changes to the governance structures of Kentucky's flagship university. The board's actions included the abolition, with immediate effect, of the university senate, which for one hundred years functioned



as the primary vehicle of shared governance. For the past century, the board delegated its authority on matters affecting the core of the university's educational mission—matters such as admission standards, curricula, approval of courses, and the creation or discontinuation of programs—to this university senate, whose membership included a large majority of elected faculty representatives. Henceforth, these decisions will be taken by the administration alone (pending, as before, ultimate board approval). Faculty will be reduced to an advisory role, alongside staff and students.

Currently, the university administration is in the process of constituting a provisional faculty senate, whose members will—in a sign of what is to come—be chosen by the provost on the basis of nominations channeled through the various deans' offices. This provisional body will be charged with the task of drawing up rules for a new elected faculty senate, one of two vehicles

through which the faculty will be able to exercise its advisory role. (The other will be a presidential council.)

Since these changes amount to a dramatic curtailment of the faculty's ability to influence the academic direction of the university, the board's decision—part of its "Project Accelerate"—was preceded by months of controversial debate, both on campus and in the larger community. A good sense of some of the major arguments can be gleaned from an exchange in the *Kentucky Lantern*, which in May published an [op-ed](#) I wrote as president of the UK chapter of the AAUP, followed by a [response](#) from Dr. Capilouto. One of the questions at stake is what it means for a public, land-grant university to serve its community. The risk of Project Accelerate is that educational effectiveness will be conceived narrowly in terms of workforce needs.

The debate, while civil, was also divisive. Both the staff senate and the student government association came out in support of the changes, hoping that equal representation on the president's council (faculty, staff, and students will each be represented by four members) will afford them greater say. This may turn out to be an illusion since the president's council has no decision-making authority. Indeed, it is entirely up to the president when to convene it at all.

Many faculty members spoke in favor of robust shared governance on April 26, when the board of trustees conducted its first reading of the new governance structures; about two hundred were in attendance. In addition, on May 6, the university senate overwhelmingly voted (58–24 with eleven abstentions) no confidence in President Capilouto's leadership. All to no avail. Project Accelerate is continuing unaltered. The question is in what direction it will take the University of Kentucky.

The text below represents the brief speech that I delivered to the board on April 26 in defense of shared governance. Each speaker was allotted three minutes.

A Three-Minute Address on Faculty Governance

Why should a university not be run like any other business? There is management and there are stakeholders: in our case, students, staff, faculty, patients, alumni, donors, sports fans . . . indeed, the entire Commonwealth of Kentucky, represented by the Board of Trustees! Management's task is to consult with these stakeholder groups, prioritize their interests, and steer the company to continuous growth.

But here at the university, there are faculty who claim that they are not just ordinary stakeholders. They don't just want to be consulted on important matters touching on the central educational mission of the university; they want to have a decisive voice! That seems unrealistic and haughty. Only eggheads who have lost touch with reality can have dreamed that up.

Even in the business world, though, there is a price to pay if management overrules those with the core competencies that lie at the heart of the company's operations. The Boeing corporation offers a recent, sad example. Because demand for airplanes surged, Boeing was no longer able to keep up with orders. So, management decided to accelerate production just a bit, cut some insignificant corners here and there. Engineers noticed and sounded the alarm, but their advice was not heeded. The result was catastrophic, as we all know: due to software problems, two planes crashed, while just recently a door plug fell off in mid-flight. Boeing's reputation is in tatters, its chairman has already resigned, and the CEO has announced his resignation.

How does this example relate to the University of Kentucky? Well, the core competency at a university is education, which involves teaching, research, and artistic work. Only the faculty have the ability to carry out these functions, after many years of training. Certainly, our university could not exist without students and staff, donors, alumni, patients, sports fans . . . and of course the state’s flagship university cannot ignore the needs of the state it serves. And yet, the faculty are the guardians of the treasury of the theoretical and practical knowledge that sustains not only the Commonwealth of Kentucky, but our entire civilization. We have to treat that treasury with great care, in particular at a point in history when we are facing a whole series of existential crises. It is a mistake to reduce the faculty to an advisory role because they seem to stand in the way of acceleration and growth. If this happens, accidents are going to occur. My colleagues have already pointed out a number of such accidents. The most serious accident, however, would be loss of educational quality because only faculty can judge what, in their respective areas, quality requires in terms of admissions standards, program offerings, and curricula. The victim of these accidents would be the people of Kentucky whom we are called to serve.

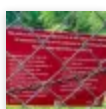
Thank you.

Philipp W. Rosemann is Cottrill-Rolfes Chair of Catholic Studies and president of the University of Kentucky chapter of the AAUP.

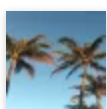


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2 thoughts on “A Major Blow to Shared Governance at the University of Kentucky”



Dr Shawn Warren June 19, 2024 at 10:48 am

“They don’t just want to be consulted on important matters touching on the central educational mission of the university; they want to have a decisive voice!” Are you people for real? Let me make this simple: As you present it, this entire issue swings on articles – not the absurd ones on this blog – but the grammatical ones, “a” and “the,” when used to claim for yourselves this decisive voice. So, which do you want, a decisive or the decisive voice?

You don’t know what you want (or what you should want). Used to be you wanted the thing you now dismiss as mere consultation. The AAUP has never really known, or operated with any relevant authority in its self-appointed position as advocate for X, Y or Z. It has failed through its band-aids and bitching to offer effective mitigation and correction for the many ills of higher education that are caused by the institutional employer model of university and colleges. This model is assumed by the AAUP and frankly all other academics, students, citizens, governments, and so, as part of a cultural-slash-institutional inheritance. It seems almost to have become identical with higher education itself.

But these institutions are mere tools used to provide higher education – and exercise authority over academics and students. I am offering you an alternative tool or model that provides a voice to academics which, if not “the” voice in the academy, then is one that finally flexes the real authority that academics necessarily have over higher education. An authority more akin to attorneys or physicians in the provision of their valued social goods, than some twisted hybrid of a proper professional and a Starbuck’s employee. There are no relevant or powerful institutional employers in this alternative professional model for higher education. Take what I offer. It is free. And it is a far better response than this absurdity to which you all now subscribe.



Dr Ramon Cerro June 19, 2024 at 2:36 pm

It will be very helpful to understand the reply above if you tell us who is Shawn Warren and what is his role in this discussion.

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