A Vote of No-Confidence and Shared Governance

In September, 2012, a majority of the tenured and tenure-track faculty members at the Imperial Valley campus of San Diego State University (SDSU-IV) voted “no confidence” in their administration. Because such a vote represents a breakdown of traditional shared governance processes, the officers of the San Diego State University Senate determined to report on the situation in order to see how shared governance might be restored.

On October 23, 2012, Senate Chair Bill Eadie and Vice Chair Julio Valdes, the authors of this report, visited the SDSU-IV campus in Calexico at the invitation of both the faculty and the administration. The purpose of the visit was to listen to whomever wished to speak to us. Appointments were scheduled at 20-minute intervals, and at times the schedule ran behind. As a result, other listening sessions were scheduled in San Diego or by telephone. We listened to tenured, untenured, and part-time faculty, staff members, administrators, alumni and members of the community. We took no notes so as to focus on the individuals to whom we were listening and to keep confidential the identities of those with whom we spoke. From the listening sessions, we noted recurrent themes and tried to shape coherent narratives from those themes. This report details those narratives, provides a perspective on shared governance and how it has been damaged at SDSU-IV. We also offer recommendations for restoring shared governance.

As might be expected from a conflict between administration and faculty, there were two narratives that emerged. One we will label the “administrative” narrative, and it focused on the current dean, his actions and accomplishments. (We should note that we will refer to the dean by his title only, even though we cannot protect his anonymity.) This narrative was primarily a positive one, though it did contain negative comments about the faculty as a group. The other narrative we will label the “faculty” narrative, which also focused on the dean but mostly from a negative standpoint – this narrative tended to portray faculty as misunderstood and potential accomplishments of faculty to be stifled by administrative interference. The narrative also portrayed the actions of administrators toward faculty and staff as sometimes being disparaging and disrespectful, particularly toward women faculty and staff.

We should note that there were some faculty and staff who agreed with the administrative narrative, and one or two who understood both narratives but professed to be “on the fence.” The majority of the faculty and staff to whom we spoke supported the faculty narrative, however.

We should also note that we did not attempt to adjudicate the degree of truth or falsehood of the narratives. They were real enough to the members of the groups that adhered to them, and for our purposes that was sufficient. We also decided neither to assign blame nor to determine who was
“right,” because we recognize that in every conflict, both groups share some responsibility. Finally, we assessed only shared governance, which is the area for which we have responsibility. We were not charged with making administrative decisions, so we avoided drafting managerial recommendations. We agreed from the start to make this report publicly available, and various actors may decide to do what they will with our findings and our suggestions.

The Two Narratives

The administrative narrative (1) described the dean as a proactive individual with admirable goals; (2) conveyed an admiration for the projects the dean has spearheaded - for example, an alternative energy initiative focusing on development of solar and wind resources, and a partnership with Imperial Valley Community College that has brought a cohort of about 100 lower division students to SDSU-IV for programs and mentorship activities (and, which replaced a smaller pilot project that was valued by SDSU-IV faculty members despite being terminated by California State University Chancellor Charles Reed); (3) expressed its supporters’ abilities to communicate and work effectively with the dean and associate dean, as well as valuing the dean’s positive regard for work being done on behalf of SDSU-IV; (4) applauded the positive relationship that the dean has been building with the community; and (5) described the administration’s faculty opponents as being self-centered, self-serving, and unwilling to change; implied that these opponents do not care about the needs of the Imperial Valley because many faculty members do not live in the community, do not participate in community events, and schedule classes in three-hour blocks so as to spend as little time as possible on campus.

The faculty narrative (1) argued that the administration has communicated defectively with the faculty and staff, particularly in terms of the value of information that is shared, as compared to the value that is not shared; (2) charged that the administration has treated faculty as subordinates rather than as colleagues, and that the administration has been quick to label any dissention as being disloyal - according to this narrative, the administration regards those with whom it deals as either friends or enemies and it does not take much to move a friend into the enemy camp; (3) described itself as being generally accepting of the administration’s initiatives, but was unhappy with the process by which decisions were made, claiming that most decisions were taken without appropriate consultation or collaboration; (4) expressed anger with the administration’s periodic negative treatment and disrespect of faculty, both privately and in public (several individuals to whom we spoke charged that women faculty and staff members were particularly singled out for disrespectful treatment); and (5) faculty members in particular believed that the dean encouraged staff and community members to hold a negative view of their activities and also believed that the administration did not do a good job of valuing the scholarly contributions of the faculty.

Analysis of these two narratives permits speculation that the discord at SDSU-IV has not been due to the nature of or the details associated with the administration’s initiatives and projects, but has been due primarily to its communication practices and the sort of treatment and regard administrators supposedly have displayed toward faculty and staff, individually and collectively. The perception that a core group works closely and in secret on matters of concern to all not only destroys trust, but also prevents efficient and effective communication between the administration and those not included in
the core group. This lack of trust leads to perceptions that members of the administration do not fulfill their presumed functions of leading faculty, supporting faculty growth, and recognizing faculty accomplishments. Rather, the appearance is that the administration has wished to avoid collaboration with faculty because such collaboration might result in conflict and hinder the progress of administrative initiatives. From our listening sessions, we concluded that shared governance is at the root of the current impasse, but we also believe that those working at SDSU-IV might have an incomplete perception of how shared governance is practiced. In the next section, we explain those practices and use our explanation to generate recommendations for restoring shared governance at SDSU-IV.

Shared Governance at San Diego State University

San Diego State University is relatively unique in its approach to shared governance. The San Diego State University Senate has a majority membership of tenured and tenure-track faculty, but there is also substantial representation from students, staff, lecturers, and senior administrators. Coaches and mid-level administrators also elect a representative to the Senate. Other Senates, even those of universities within the CSU system, operate as wholly faculty bodies. Many of them may give groups other than faculty a voice but generally not a vote. The campus president of the union representing faculty also receives a non-voting seat on the SDSU Senate, a move that emphasizes that shared governance and collective bargaining cooperate but are essentially different from each other.

Senate standing committees are designed for collaboration on particular tasks and include senior administrators or their designees, as well as staff and students, as voting members. This deliberate inclusion of administrative, staff, and student voices in the process of policy development is a hallmark of SDSU's version of shared governance.

The upshot of the SDSU system is that all parties expect collaboration among the groups represented by the Senate. Collaboration means that these groups work together to develop policy and then the policy is implemented by those who are charged with doing so. Most of the time, administrators implement policy. Faculty usually give themselves an obligation to review periodically how policies are being applied and to make suggestions for improvement. Shared governance recognizes that faculty and administrators have different functions but work with each other for the common good.

Effective collaboration exists when good will and a modicum of trust is exhibited among the collaborators. Good will is a product of several communication-related factors: (1) a willingness to speak openly to fellow collaborators; (2) a willingness to regard those collaborators in a positive manner, to value their contributions, and not to disparage them either publicly or in private; (3) a willingness to speak directly, to disagree civilly and to present reasons for such disagreement, as well as to avoid retribution for disagreement; (4) a willingness to avoid “hidden agendas” and to compromise to achieve agreement; and (5) a willingness to put the good of the whole ahead of individual benefit. Trust is developed over time and is a function of both a series of reliable performances as collaborators and reliable implementation of policies developed through collaboration.

We should also distinguish “collaboration” from “consultation.” Both of these terms are used in conducting the business of shared governance, but they differ in how they function. Administrators at
San Diego State University are expected to consult with faculty (and to a lesser degree with the other constituencies making up the University Senate) about many of the decisions they face. They may consult with a small group of elected advisers (SDSU’s provost, for example, consults regularly with the Senate officers; deans consult with department chairs and school directors and with a college-level advisory committee), and while they should listen to and value the advice given they may decide not to follow it. Collaboration should be expected on policy development and decisions with long-term consequences, but experience shows that it never hurts when collaboration is chosen over consultation.

**Recommendations**

An analysis of the administrative and faculty narratives at SDSU-IV indicates that shared governance has broken down because conditions for effective collaboration do not currently exist. Consultation occurs but is not always effective.

The two narratives indicate that good will is not being exhibited: (1) there is little willingness to speak openly to those outside of the group with which each person identifies; (2) there is little positive regard among the members of both groups for members of the other group and group members regularly criticize the other group as a collective; (3) what consultative communication that does exist is characterized by administrative pleas for advice that generate passive-aggressive faculty responses: its form is indirect, and each side yields retribution as a weapon; (4) what collaboration that does exist provokes suspicion of hidden agendas; and (5) each group claims to be interested in the good of the whole, but the opposing group suspects otherwise.

Because conditions for collaboration do not currently exist, both groups have come to mistrust each other, and this mistrust affects how policies have been implemented at SDSU-IV. The resulting negative climate leads to only one condition of trust - the two groups trust that the other group will react negatively, and therefore these expectations perpetuate the resulting negative cycle of behavior.

We recommend that administration and faculty/staff work to restore their ability to collaborate. To do so, these groups must break out of the negative communication patterns their mutual behavior has generated. Breaking these patterns may be difficult to achieve. Here are suggestions we can offer regarding the conditions for collaboration and trust-building that we outlined above:

1. Currently, communication seems to consist of cycles where administrators “tell” and faculty/staff “react.” If ways could be found to allow members of the two groups to interact as peers a more productive pattern might well emerge.

2. Both sides currently criticize each other, mostly privately but sometimes in public. To break such a pattern administrators might look for opportunities to praise faculty. Highlighting faculty research collaborations can help the local community to understand faculty work beyond teaching. Faculty members might reciprocate by praising administrative accomplishments. Praise is only effective if it is perceived as being genuine, however.
3. Shared governance works best when the participants regard themselves as peers and colleagues, rather than as superiors and subordinates. Direct and civil speech promotes a climate of trust. Misunderstandings can be avoided by offering arguments that are supported by evidence instead of making unsupported assertions. Consciously valuing evidence that supports a different viewpoint can lead to respectful resolutions of conflicts. Seeing disagreements as challenges to be worked through rather than hurdles to be overcome can lead to better understanding of other points of view.

4. Positive trust is built in increments. Collaborating effectively in small ways leads to the ability to collaborate effectively on bigger issues.

5. Ongoing conflicts can often be resolved by trying to find what everyone agrees would be the “good of the whole.” It seems to us that there may be a difference in values underlying the administrative and faculty narratives. Clarifying the values of SDSU-IV as an institution would be a good place to start in coming to a shared understanding of the “good of the whole” concept, and once the principles underlying that concept have been made explicit, groups can continue to refer to them when collaborating.

6. It is always appropriate to ask when taking an action that will affect others, “Is this action going to promote a climate of trust at SDSU-IV?” If the answer is no, perhaps more collaboration is called for before taking any action that may be predicted to affect trust negatively.

7. We were very concerned to hear reports that women at SDSU-IV have been particularly singled out for negative comments and disrespect. Such actions not only demonstrate a lack of collegiality but may provide cause for grievance or legal action. The SDSU Office of Employee Relations and Compliance offers training in nondiscrimination practices on a regular basis. We recommend that everyone employed at SDSU-IV will become familiar with the content of this training program and will work to promote a culture where all are treated with appropriate respect and in a collegial manner.

We hope that effective shared governance can be restored at SDSU-IV, and we commit to participating in that restoration as needed.