



## Shared Governance at the University of Wyoming: A White Paper

April 30, 2021

*The variety and complexity of the tasks performed by institutions of higher education produce an inescapable interdependence among governing board, administration, faculty, students, and others (AAUP, 1990).*

A university is first and foremost an intellectual community built of experts and tasked to drive knowledge and creativity to generate opportunity for its students. Achieving these goals depends on scholar/teachers and students, and on the enabling work of administrative leaders, staff and trustees. Success requires operationalizing the talents of this broad community and engaging the expertise of faculty, the needs of students, the professionalism of staff, the vision of administrators, and the public service of trustees. It requires functional shared governance.

### What is Shared Governance?

Shared governance represents a basic tenet of universities as intellectual communities and represents a philosophy and practice that foregrounds community expertise to inform deliberations and shape actions. As stated by the Association of Governing Boards, “Shared governance is the process by which various constituents (traditionally governing boards, senior administration, and faculty; possibly also staff, students, or others) contribute to decision making related to college or university policy and procedure” (AGB 2017). For effective shared governance, freedom of expression and respect for the diversity of opinions is of utmost importance. All stakeholders should feel free to contribute to the conversation without fear of retaliation for expressing opposing views, as different views often represent the impetus for growth and change. Furthermore, strong systems of shared governance link the Board of Trustees, the President, faculty, staff, and students in a “well-functioning partnership purposefully devoted to a well-defined, broadly affirmed institutional vision” (Bahls as cited in AGB March/April 2014). In this process, members of the university share responsibility for identifying and pursuing an aligned set of sustainable strategic directions. Effective shared governance “strengthens the quality of leadership and decision making at an institution”; it “engenders an institutional culture of collective ownership and accountability for the institution’s present and future”; it “increases the odds that the very best thinking by all parties is brought to bear on institutional challenges”; “decisions are implemented more quickly and more effectively”; and the institution “enhances its ability to achieve its vision and to meet strategic goals” (AGB White Paper, 2017). **Thus, shared governance requires early and ongoing collaboration through established structures and procedures that recognize the contributions and requirements of all members of the University.**

#### SHARED GOVERNANCE:

The process by which stakeholders contribute to the institution’s decision-making process.

## Models of Shared Governance

To ensure robust and effective shared governance at all levels of the institution, agreement by the various stakeholders involved on a similar model is necessary. While many ideas and definitions of shared governance exist, Bahls (2014), in a white paper by the Association of Governing Boards (AGB 2017), outlined four specific models. These can be characterized as:

- Shared Governance as Equal Rights. In this model, equal say is the goal as it applies to governance. Decisions are not made until a consensus is achieved.
- Shared Governance as Consultation. In this model, those parties responsible for making decisions consult with others and consider their positions.
- Shared Governance as Rules of Engagement. In this model, clear rules define the roles and authority of the board, faculty, and administration in such things as academic decisions, budget decisions, selection of the president, etc. This model specifies rules of engagement when faculty, board members, and administrators disagree.
- Shared Governance as a System of Aligning Priorities. In this model, open communication aims to align priorities, creating a culture of shared responsibility for the welfare of the institution, and creating a system of checks and balances to ensure the institution stays mission centered.

Shared Governance as Aligning Priorities is preferred as it creates a culture of shared responsibility for the welfare of the institution.

Extensive conversations with a broad university constituency, which included members of the Board of Trustees, the President, past-Presidents, Academic Vice Presidents, Deans, Directors and Department Heads, the faculty, members of Faculty Senate, past Faculty Senate Chairs, members of AAUP, members of Staff Senate, and members of Associated Students

of the University of Wyoming (ASUW), revealed that UW is perceived as relying on a minimal expression of shared governance: Consultation. That is, shared governance is considered to have been accomplished when parties confer with constituencies. These engaged conversations also revealed that the university community considers shared governance through Aligning Priorities as preferable, given the model's capacity to build a more robust university. Aligning Priorities creates a culture of shared responsibility for the welfare of the institution. It derives from open communication and operates through a system of checks and balances that ensures the institution stays both collaborative and mission centered. It is this model that informs our principles, strategies, and best practices.

## The University of Wyoming's Commitment to Shared Governance

Members of the University of Wyoming are committed to the philosophies and key principles of Shared Governance, including:

### Alignment of Priorities

Universities are constantly challenged by the advancement of knowledge and the limits of resources. That means the university community must stand alert to our ongoing responsibilities and be open to change. For UW to develop successfully along the lines of shifting research and ongoing pedagogical obligations, we must align and share priorities through a collaborative and consultative process. We need to keep our academic mission in the forefront, supported by the administrative offices of the university. It can appear, at times, that the "non-academic" arm of the institution is driving decisions without thoughtful consideration to the short- or long-term effects on academics; or, at least, without appropriate input from

the academic side of the house. Our university processes need to allow for flexibility and be driven by the people relevant to and most affected by a given issue. Furthermore, maintaining our roles and responsibilities in terms of decision-making is imperative in supporting a strong shared governance structure. Aligning priorities provides a steady foundation for necessary change and allows the university community to break the cycle of responding under a “crisis model” of making decisions quickly without enacting proper shared governance.

### Consultation & Communication

Different arms of the university have different responsibilities. Yet in a complex institution such as this, expertise is dispersed, and areas and roles are interrelated. We meet our responsibilities best by drawing on the wide university for input, and that input is best sought while processes and actions are building. “The most important aspect of shared governance is developing systems of open communication where the Board of Trustees, senior administrators, faculty, staff, and students work to align and implement strategic priorities” (Bahls, March/April 2014). Consultation includes discussion and engagement from stakeholders and is accomplished through dialogue rather than under directives from the top. Senates, committees, and working groups are appropriate and necessary routes for official consultation and decision-making. Gathering input via listening – and hearing – sessions where all participants seek to understand and provide meaningful and thoughtful feedback is a shared responsibility. However, consultation is not enough. Effective shared governance also requires that we close the loop between input and outcome at the end of deliberation by communicating how responses were incorporated into the decision-making process. This practice produces decisions and actions in which the community can invest.

Freedom of expression and respect for the diversity of opinions is of utmost importance. All stakeholders should feel free to contribute to the conversation without fear of retaliation for expressing opposing views, as different views often represent the impetus for growth and change.

### Service & Participation

The structures and processes of the university work best when they are widely communicated and understood, are seen to be in operation, and are open to participation by knowledgeable individuals across the institution. All units of the university have the responsibility to prepare their members for service through a robust onboarding process and to support them in service. All members of the university have the responsibility to prepare conscientiously for service, and to take their service seriously, honoring their professional ethics, their representative role, and their duty to report back to their constituency. All those who convene deliberative bodies, whether official or ad hoc, must adhere to best practices in identifying and inviting a wide diversity of participants.

### Responsibility, Community and Civility

We must send our best to serve in representative bodies, on committees and to engage in other deliberative processes. Those who serve must give their best. At all levels of involvement, we must remember our responsibilities to knowledge and education, and also to one another. Robust shared governance structures and processes allow us to proceed with confidence, investing in one another and our common goals. Taking the time to participate in shared governance and effective change management allows for the development of trust and respect across the institution. Shared governance demands the informed, sustained, civil and respectful participation of all members of the diverse community that makes

up a university. Shared governance represents a deliberative process that requires time for all stakeholders to obtain enough information to make an informed decision. However, implementing robust shared governance processes, along with aligning priorities, allows for decisions to occur in a timely manner allowing for rapid responses when needed. Every effort should be made to communicate and share information in a timely manner.

## Shared Governance Responsibilities

Specific areas of responsibility for the university's communities are indicated in the Wyoming Constitution Article 7, Wyoming Statute 21-17-103, and in the Regulations of the University. Responsibilities based on the principles of shared governance require the expertise, commitment, participation and labor of the university as a whole. Shared governance is the mode by which we sustain and succeed in these responsibilities. The University is committed to engage in a system of shared governance based on the model of Aligning Priorities. This model of Shared Governance works to create a culture of shared responsibility for the welfare of the institution. It derives from open communication and operates through a system of structural/institutional checks and balances that ensures the institution stays both collaborative and mission centered.

## Shared Governance Strategies and Best Practices

In order to allow for the development of a robust shared governance process that becomes embedded within our university system, now and into the future, the university should strive to implement the following best practices (AGB, 2017; Bahls, 2014; Vanderbilt, 2018).

1. **Transparent and frequent communication** - The primary objective of shared governance is improved decision-making. Decisions are ideally made conditional on relevant, reliable, objective, and verifiable information. Thus, communication, and the information flow it facilitates, is foundational to shared governance. Furthermore, and importantly, transparent and complete communication builds institutional memory over time. In order to achieve this,

- Decisions being considered should be clearly communicated. This includes specifying why those decisions are before the university community, the timetable for the decision, and the extent of the faculty, staff, and students' opportunity to participate in the decision-making process. Structures that allow not only for input into decision making, but that foster communication throughout the entire process, need to be developed.
- Communication should reflect an actual dialogue. Directives in which the decision appears already to have been determined short-circuit the deliberative process and undermine shared governance.
- To make dialogue effective, all stakeholders should be cognizant of their shared role in and contributions to the discussion. Participants should engage in active participation that produces thoughtful, meaningful feedback.
- Dialogue should be extensive, with all voices included in the conversation and being heard.
- The tone of communication must be respectful. All participants must listen for the purpose of understanding, pay attention, critically examine the issue, and work through disagreements.

Efforts to seek input should be timely and early.

- Communication should be frequent, but also targeted, ensuring that the appropriate stakeholder groups are engaged. Regular communication to all those relevant to a decision eliminates conjecture and provides constituents with information on how decisions are reached.
  - The loop must be conscientiously closed between consulting and hearing, and ultimate decision-making. This often requires further engagement beyond listening sessions or working groups. Decision-makers, at all levels, must demonstrate feedback was seriously considered, even if it was not incorporated in the decision, and provide reasoning for that choice. Closing the loop with colleagues and the university community on the decision-making process allows for trust and good will to be established through the deliberative process.
  - Stakeholders and University representatives at all levels across the institution share the responsibility to communicate information regarding decision making to their constituents.
2. **Decision-making collaboration** - Shared governance promotes an environment of soliciting early and genuine feedback, even on preliminary ideas. It benefits from the respectful and inclusive collaboration of all constituents, which often includes administration, faculty, staff, students, and others. All stakeholders should:
- Work toward developing a shared and clearly articulated commitment to trust, collaboration, communication, transparency, inclusiveness, honesty, and integrity.
  - Provide regular opportunities for faculty, staff, and students to include their voices throughout the entire decision-making process regarding important issues and major decisions. This will produce more informed decisions. We need to understand and recognize that interactive conversation regarding specific issues is a necessity; on-line, multi-purpose “comment” forms are a supplement to, not a substitute for, that conversation.
  - Recognize and support the legitimacy of faculty, staff, and student leaders by inviting them to the table not only at crucial junctures, but also as active and engaged partners during the regular decision-making process.
  - Involve the appropriate individuals in the decision-making process. To be effective, decision-making must consult those most affected and those with the relevant expertise and experience.
  - Allow decision makers the flexibility to make choices in the best interests of the programs or areas they serve. Individuals, such as administration, Deans, Directors, Unit Heads, faculty, and staff, are hired into positions based on their skills, knowledge, and expertise. Provide them with the trust, respect, and processes to do their jobs effectively, while also holding them accountable for their decision-making through a regular evaluation process.

- Ensure a clear alignment between our mission, long-range priorities, and the strategic plan. This requires an extensive collaborative process whereby the entire university community engages together. This is more likely to result in robust shared governance, as well as more informed decision-making.
  - Determine timelines, including the schedule for decisions. In regular circumstances, this ensures adequate time to engage in sufficient shared governance; in times of duress, this allows the refocusing of energies to expedite the task at hand through shared governance processes.
  - Periodically, revisit decisions to examine whether they are effectively meeting goals and priorities of all within the institution and ensuring a continuation of the shared governance decision-making model.
3. **Active faculty, staff and student engagement in governance activities** - Shared governance signifies the engagement of the members of the university with the university's advancement. The primary objective of shared governance is improved decision making, not necessarily consensus building, in setting the university's direction. This objective best occurs in an environment that genuinely conveys, explicitly and implicitly, inclusion of all constituents by actively seeking, and openly receiving, a broad, diverse set of lived experiences, information, and feedback. This can be achieved by:
- Faculty retaining responsibility for advancing curriculum, subject matter, methods of instruction, research, and those aspects of student life which relate to the educational process, as well as determining faculty status.
  - Board of Trustees and Administration rewarding strong governance by supporting the current governance structure including senate committees, stating the importance of the senates in making appropriate and timely decisions, and valuing those actions.
  - Developing a mechanism to involve a larger swath of informed individuals with a variety of perspectives in decision-making and to accomplish a more robust involvement of all in the shared governance process.
  - Developing a plan for cultivating strong internal leadership and considering those internal leaders for possible positions across the institution. Seeking out recommendations and self-nominations for internal positions that become available.
  - Developing and instituting a robust on-boarding process for all levels of institutional membership from staff members to Board of Trustees that includes, but is not limited to, education about the nature of the unit and the regulations that underpin the roles and responsibilities of various groups across the institution. Professional training on shared governance needs to be provided to all groups.
  - Providing opportunities for BOT, administration, faculty and staff to engage together outside of governance matters, thus cultivating good will and establishing channels for communication that encourage and support successful shared governance.

4. **Regular assessment of shared governance** - Set benchmarks for good shared governance and periodically and regularly assess whether those benchmarks are being maintained. Recommendations include:

- Actively engaging all university constituents in developing a statement of UW's philosophy of shared governance that allows for flexibility, responsibility, and accountability, as well as an institutional commitment to ensuring a broad understanding of shared governance and the value it offers an institution or system.
- Building flexibility back into our institutional processes to allow for the nimbleness required by a large institution in order to handle changing environments and circumstances.
- Ensuring that the standards and procedures in operational use within the University conform to the policy established by the Board of Trustees and to the standards of sound academic practice, while allowing flexibility when required, which will allow us to embed the vision and mission of our institution, as well as a culture of shared governance, into our language and our actions.
- Building on existing models within the institution that reflect strong shared governance structures.
- Periodically assessing the state of shared governance and developing an action plan to improve it.

### **What is My Role in Shared Governance?**

For shared governance to be successful, all stakeholders must act in good faith, understand their roles in the university community, be familiar with university policies and regulations, and take personal responsibility for their doing their part.

#### University Administrators

The President, Vice Presidents and other University Officers provide leadership in specific areas of the university. Their authority, as outlined in UW Regulation 1-1 (Organization of the University), often includes making final decisions about matters pertaining to the Division they oversee. Many of these decisions are made after consultation with various university stakeholders. The President and Provost/Vice President of Academic Affairs regularly consult with Faculty Senate, often through the Executive Committee. Other Vice Presidents report to and consult with senates on matters that fall within their purview. The President and Provost/Vice President of Academic Affairs also may work with existing and/or appoint university-wide committees, which include faculty (and staff and students where appropriate) to address academic and other university matters.

### Academic Officers

Deans, Directors, Associate and Assistant Deans, and Department and Division Heads provide similar leadership and make decisions about matters related to the unit they oversee. They should work closely through the committee structures outlined in their unit bylaws to advance the work and decisions of the unit. These committees should include faculty, staff, and student representation, where possible and when appropriate. Every effort should be made to provide information in a timely fashion.

### Faculty, Staff and Students

Faculty, staff and students have the responsibility to understand and follow the policies and regulations of the university and participate in governance of their unit, college, and university at large. Faculty should voice their opinions honestly and respectfully, without fear of reprisal. Every effort should be made to respond to requests for information in a timely fashion.

### The Role of the Senates

Faculty Senate, Staff Senate, and the ASUW are the official, elected representatives for the faculty, staff, and students at UW. In accordance with UW Regulations, Faculty Senate recommends the establishment of educational and academic policies which promote and protect the interests and welfare of the University community, protects academic freedom, and furthers the full and free development and presentation of scholarly learning, teaching, research, creative activity and service. Staff Senate provides a means of communication between staff, faculty, and administration, advise the administration of working and employment practices, and ensures student success. ASUW serves students in the best manner possible through accurate representation, professional interaction with campus programs and organizations, and responsible, effective leadership. All three senates, usually represented by its executive committee, responds to requests for consultation from others, including the Administration and Board of Trustees.

### **Final Remarks**

Shared governance is difficult to articulate, to maintain and to practice. It requires cultivating an institutional culture of good will, good intentions, and commitment to common values. It requires developing ways to engender trust and respect, as well as ongoing consideration and periodic recalibration. Universities where principles and structures of shared governance are established and strong make advancements into the future and help to sustain the external communities they serve. The president of Rhodes College has argued that especially in stressful circumstances, “colleges with healthy shared governance — those that regularly practice sharing information, consulting broadly and relying on constituent expertise in making decisions — [are] well served and [do things] more effectively than colleges that rely only on top-down decision making” (Hass, 2020).

**We are thus obligated to bring rigor and commitment to Shared Governance at the University of Wyoming, from all parties. We must maintain Shared Governance principles and practices in all times, positioning ourselves for the future under the challenges that the twenty-first century inevitably brings.**

## References

- American Association of University Professors (AAUP). 1990. "Statement on Government of Colleges and Universities."
- Association of Governing Boards (AGB) White Paper. 2017. "Shared Governance: Changing with the Times."
- Association of Governing Boards (AGB Fundamentals). 2020. <https://agb.org/knowledge-center/board-fundamentals/>
- Bahls, Steven C. March/April 2014. "How to Make Shared Governance Work: Some Best Practices." AGB, Vol. 22, No. 2.
- Bahls, Steven. 2014. "Shared Governance in Times of Change: A Practical Guide for Colleges and Universities." AGB.
- Cowen, Scott S. Aug. 2018. "Shared Governance Does not Mean Shared Decision Making." Chronicle of Higher Education.
- Goodman, Norman. 2017. "Conclusion: Working Together to Share Governance," in Shared Governance in Higher Education: Demands, Transitions, Transformations, Vol. 1 (Cramer, Sharon F., ed.).
- Hass, Marjorie. 2020. "Shared Governance is a Strength during the Covid-19 Crisis" Inside Higher Ed, 29 April 2020: <https://www.insidehighered.com/views/2020/04/29/colleges-healthy-shared-governance-perform-better-crises-those-top-down-decision>
- Tamrowski, Nina. 2017. "Introduction," in Shared Governance in Higher Education: New Paradigms, Evolving Perspectives, Vol. 2 (Cramer, Sharon F., ed.).
- Vanderbilt Shared Governance Committee (Vanderbilt). 2018. "Shared Governance at Vanderbilt University."

## Appendix – Background and Acknowledgment

In 2017, the University of Wyoming participated in the Great Colleges to Work For survey. The survey showed that many employees perceived an erosion of shared governance at UW. It also revealed that shared governance means different things from different university perspectives. As a result of these findings, in July 2019, the University's Office of the Provost and Faculty Senate formed the Shared Governance Working Group (SGWG). The SGWG was charged to (1) engage the university community ... in open discussions about shared governance at UW, and (2) provide educative experiences [to] clarify and improve understanding of shared governance at UW. The SGWG was further charged to produce (1) a preliminary draft of a Pythian Paper on Shared Governance ... that, at minimum, addresses cornerstone principles and provides recommendations for good practice, and (2) any additional recommendations for restructuring of procedures or processes that may be needed to support successful shared governance.

The Office of Academic Affairs would like to thank the following faculty and UW Shared Governance Working Group members for the considerable time and effort that was devoted to the development of this white paper – a paper that by its very nature reflects the construct of shared governance and the principles that underlie it.

Caroline McCracken-Flesher, Chair; Professor of English and Director for Global Studies and UW in Scotland; past Chair of Faculty Senate

Jacquelyn Bridgeman, Professor of Law and Director School of Culture, Gender and Social Justice

Adrienne Freng, Professor of Criminal Justice and Sociology and Chair-Elect, Faculty Senate

Warrie Means, Assoc. Prof. Animal Science and Associate Dean College of Agriculture and Natural Resources; past Chair of Faculty Senate

Robert Sprague, Professor of Legal Studies in Business