

Remarks, 21 September 2005

I want to tell you that the first version of today's agenda omitted this item, but my predecessor insisted it should be included. So, Vall gets at least some of the blame for the banalities, pomposities, and idiocies I'm liable to inflict on you this afternoon. Of course, I'll take credit for anything sensible I manage to say.

When I realized my colleagues on the steering committee meant it when they said I had to do this, I started wondering how on earth I had gotten to this position. This aspect of my career is a long history of accidents and chance, but as I reflected on it I knew there were lots of points at which I could have said no, and if I had, somebody else would be here today. So why didn't I ever say no? Lots of reasons present themselves, from sheer hubris and egotistical pride, through the vestiges of an overdeveloped sense of duty instilled during a very traditional English schooling, to the simple inability to say no when I ought to. But I should put an appropriate spin on things today, and I am certain that a key part of the reason is that I actually *believe* in faculty governance and faculty participation in a collegial process of running the University, and believe in it very strongly.

The faculty of the University, through faculty governance in the departments, schools, and colleges, and then through the Faculty Senate and its committee structure, has both responsibility for, and control of, the academic policies of the University. To quote the University constitution, subject to constraints imposed by the Florida Constitution and legislation, "The Faculty Senate shall be the basic legislative body of the University.

1. It shall formulate measures for the maintenance of a comprehensive educational policy and for the maximum utilization of the intellectual resources of the University.
2. It shall determine and define University-wide policies on academic matters, including Liberal Studies policy, admission,

grading standards, and the requirements within which the several degrees may be granted. “

This amounts to self-regulation on the part of the faculty: we set the curriculum, requirements for graduate faculty status and for degrees, and so on, the whole of academic policy. In the economic sphere, we have lots of experience with self-regulation. It is common in the professions, and it is far from an ideal way to run things from the point of view of the broader good, because with self-regulation there is a constant danger that the regulators will be too self-interested. That is one reason that rarely is total self-regulation permitted; accountants, stock exchanges, lawyers, and other groups who are largely self-regulating are also subject to oversight and legislation by the State. The same is true of Universities, except that in Universities there is a very powerful group known as the administration that controls the budget and other resources, and makes many non-academic decisions, and is accountable to the outside world.

However, administrators exist to administer, and the dictionary is quite interesting on the meaning of administer. My preferred dictionary gives two meanings, “to manage, especially business affairs,” and “to put into operation, make work, provide, give, or hand out.” One example given is ‘administer punishment.’ Now don’t think I am opposed to administration – efficient administration is extremely valuable, and FSU’s administrators have very good intentions, as shown by their efforts to improve the quality of the institution with such things as the “Pathways to Excellence” initiative, which I applaud. My dictionary is behind the times for America: here, administrations at all levels are expected to propose policy as well as just manage. And of course, in Universities administrators have a very difficult task; faculty have enormous autonomy in what they do as individuals, and issuing orders to them tends to be counterproductive. So with academic initiatives, ultimate responsibility, and actual nitty-gritty implementation, lies with the faculty, so administration initiatives will not succeed without the wholehearted commitment and efforts of the faculty. To obtain that commitment and effort, governance must be collegial and shared between the faculty and the administration. As a Princeton economist said long ago, if there is not adequate opportunity for voice, there

will be exit – and exit, disconnection from the objectives of the administration, will lead to failure.

Faculty have two advantages, and some huge disadvantages, when it comes to making and implementing academic policy and decisions, i.e. playing their role in shared governance. The first advantage is that as a body, the faculty go on for ever, whereas administrations come and go, so faculty are likely to take a longer-term view. The second advantage is that faculty tend to be interested almost solely in the academic purpose of the University, and are relatively uninterested in non-academic issues, incentives, or constraints. This implies that faculty will tend to focus on the academic consequences of decisions, and sometimes spot the unintended academic consequences of non-academic issues. Of course, this also has disadvantages; with some rare exceptions among those who have been department chairs, the vast majority of faculty refuse to recognize the relevance of opportunity costs or constraints on resources for their preferred academic policies, so tend to just assume that the most important job of administrators is to find the resources the faculty want.

Second, what faculty tend to be really interested in is their own research, and things that will give them more time and resources to do it, preferably with larger numbers of like-minded colleagues. This is the self-interest danger; few faculty are strongly motivated to devote time and energy to undergraduate education beyond teaching their own courses. But we must always remember our implicit bargain with the rest of society: they pay us to do research, in return for educating society's young. We justify that on the grounds that if the faculty do research, the education they deliver will be better than otherwise. We neglect that promise at our peril, so the faculty does need to pay attention to the quality of our undergraduate programs.

Another huge disadvantage of faculty from the point of view of making academic policies and decisions is that the process is time consuming, and can also be skull-numbingly boring, bureaucratic, and tedious. Those of you in this room with experience with SACS or SMALCs will, I think, agree with me. In this context, we do understand

opportunity cost; there are other things we would all much rather do than discuss in committees how we are going to assess learning objectives in a way that meets the requirements of SMALCs.

But this is where the danger lies. A truism about self-governance is that if it is not exercised, it will be usurped. If the faculty do not pay attention, and exercise their quality control function over the curriculum, academic programs, especially undergraduate programs, distance learning, granting of graduate faculty status, and the like, then the administrators will do it for us, we will lose control, and eventually things may start happening that we won't think should be associated with a self-respecting University.

So, what I am trying to say is that however futile and make-work it often may seem, however much Senate meetings seem like a total waste of time, they are not. Faculty governance really does matter; the faculty have a greater interest in the academic quality of the institution than any other group, and the faculty have the responsibility for maintaining and improving academic quality; ultimately, only the faculty can do it. I promise you I will try to minimize administrators using our meetings to try to pretend to consult the faculty by insulting or assaulting the Senate with PowerPoint slides. Administration consultation with the faculty must be real and meaningful, and I will do my best to make sure it is. In my view, the Senate matters far less than unit-level, departmental collegial governance, and our committees, except as the pinnacle of the structure, but without the Senate and its committees there would be no overall faculty watchdog over University academic quality and integrity, and the departments might themselves become fiefdoms. What we do here matters; that is why I am here.

Jim Cobbe