



ESSENTIAL 5: Commitment to Shared Governance

The board establishes structures of leadership that invite members of the campus community to contribute to the vitality of the institution.

SUMMARY: 4 STEPS TO SMOOTH-FUNCTIONING SHARED GOVERNANCE

Shared governance is a long-time feature of theological education in North America, yet it remains an often misunderstood and criticized aspect within institutional life. Board members, administrators, and faculty have all expressed doubts about the concept at various times. In many institutions, shared governance tends to be an uneasy truce among conflicting groups. However, focusing attention on the following steps can open the way to its better functioning.

STEP 1: Identify the key governance stakeholders in your institution.

This task is relatively straightforward in free-standing, inter-denominational schools where governance responsibilities are typically shared by the usual participants: board, administration, and faculty. In other settings, ecclesial partners also play a role in governance. For embedded seminaries or consortia, pinpointing governance stakeholders can be a challenge, making their identification even more important. In all institutional situations, consulting the by-laws can provide guidance.

STEP 2: Identify the key governance decisions faced by the school.

Wise boards recognize that they can't – and should not – attempt to identify these decisions alone. Anticipating future challenges, opportunities, and changes requires the involvement of all governance partners in the process of envisioning what lies ahead. The good news is that by engaging others in this work, the board signals to stakeholders their respect for and dependence on their participation in governance.

STEP 3: Identify the roles of various governance stakeholders in each of the key decisions.

Ambiguity is the devil's playground, especially in shared governance, which often becomes the source of conflict. While taking time to clarify the roles and responsibilities of the various stakeholder groups doesn't guarantee squabble-free governance, it significantly helps to ease tensions in smoothing ruffled feathers.

STEP 4: Assess the adequacy of existing governance structures to handle the work ahead.

This step involves uncovering governance functions, policies, and patterns to ascertain their purpose. It also identifies new pathways to and practices for establishing healthy shared governance. Additionally, it is essential to ensure that changes to the governance structures – whether deletions or additions – are properly documented in the relevant handbooks.

There's no denying that completing these four steps requires time, and board leaders should be prepared to address questions about the ROI of their efforts. Wise stewards know from experience that an ounce of prevention is never a waste; in fact, it is worth as much (or more) as a pound of cure.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

How is “shared governance” defined at our institution, and what role has the board played in shaping the definition? (Investigative)

What might we simplify, combine, modify, or otherwise change to ensure our governance practices are up to the challenges of this time? (Speculative)

How does the concept of striving for the unity of the Spirit, while recognizing differences, manifest in our institution’s governance structures? Discuss the board’s responsibility for modeling such unity. (Subjective)



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