Governance Review Without Tears

You, too, can overhaul your governance structure without alienating anyone.
By Lynn K. Davis and Deborah L. Page

Yes, it can happen. The faculty at the Raymond Walters College of the University of Cincinnati, where we teach, recently conceived, developed, and implemented a complete governance review that the faculty approved unanimously. We’re going to tell you how we did it—the rest is up to you. But we hope you can benefit on your campus from our experience.

Raymond Walters College is one of the sixteen colleges of the University of Cincinnati. This branch campus offers transfer programs, associate degrees, and technical baccalaureate degrees. The college’s more than 140 faculty members and its governance structure are mostly independent of the rest of the university—the state even funds our college separately. All faculty of the university, however, are governed by the collective bargaining contract established by the University of Cincinnati chapter of the AAUP.

The college has a long history of active shared governance. The faculty participate fully in a system of college committees that handle academic affairs; faculty reappointment, promotion, and tenure; curriculum and assessment; student honors and probation; faculty development; and issues involving strategic planning and infrastructure management. A set of faculty bylaws governs each committee as well as the organization of the faculty as a body, with certain responsibilities delegated to an elected faculty executive committee. The bylaws are included in the college’s faculty handbook. Current and past versions of the handbook, as well as minutes of faculty meetings, are available at www.libraries.uc.edu/libraries/rwc under Faculty Resources.

Why Governance Restructuring?

Shortly after the college’s inception in 1967, shared governance was instituted with a faculty committee structure. Over the next thirty-five years, ad hoc committees evolved and proliferated. During the 1990s, students and staff members were added to faculty committees, many of which also included one or more administrators, who served ex-officio. Gradually, as the ratio of faculty to other members changed, faculty control of the direction of committee work decreased. The college dean and other administrators attended and influenced the direction of committee meetings, and senior faculty participation decreased, leaving more of the work to junior faculty. Each committee conducted its affairs independently and made recommendations directly to administrators, although some issues were brought before the entire faculty for approval. Committee minutes varied in thoroughness and were not distributed until after committee approval, often months after a meeting had occurred.
These developments resulted in the diffusion of the faculty’s voice and a governance structure that provided no mechanism for true shared governance. Efforts by individual committees to review their bylaws could not address the overall governance organization nor strengthen the voice of the faculty. In 2002, when the college dean was near to completing her term of office, the time seemed right to consider a new governance structure.

A New Vision

To begin the process, the faculty executive committee appointed an ad hoc governance review committee consisting of senior faculty members. They had a history of effective leadership, broad institutional knowledge, and governance expertise; their job was to consider the good of the institution as a whole, not to represent particular academic departments or committees. Collectively, they had served on every committee in the college and had experience in university-wide governance and the AAUP. The committee included faculty members who had been department heads as well as a former associate dean, who provided a valuable administrative perspective. Junior faculty members appointed after the time when faculty had a stronger role in governance perhaps did not fully appreciate the problem of the weakening of the faculty voice. Although they participated actively in the day-to-day committee work of the college, most junior faculty seemed content to have experienced faculty take the lead.

The governance review committee quickly realized the need to define "faculty governance" and "shared college governance" and to distinguish the role of the faculty and its contractual domain from that of the other governing bodies at the college. The committee referenced university bylaws, rules, and contracts as well as AAUP and accreditation-association documents, noting two important principles. It determined that any new governance structure would have to enable the faculty (1) to make its own regulations governing matters within its jurisdiction (faculty governance) and (2) to participate in decision making with other constituencies involving broader issues within the institution (shared college governance). Accordingly, following research, solicited recommendations, and debate, the committee developed a vision for a revised governance structure with a twofold goal: (1) to re-establish faculty-only committees in those areas that are clearly in the purview of faculty and (2) to support true college-wide shared governance through a framework of multiconstituent committees.

The review committee, recognizing the faculty’s authority over its own bylaws, considered first how to clarify the role of the faculty while maintaining an appropriate role for students, staff, and administrators in the faculty governance structure. The members identified current committees whose membership would consist solely of faculty, noting that remaining existing committees properly belonged to the multiconstituent framework. The two structures—faculty-only and multiconstituent—were designed to work both independently and cooperatively, much like the governing bodies of a city and its surrounding county.

Step-by-Step Goals

Developing a new governance structure took two years, from spring 2002 to spring 2004. Creating a timeline with incremental goals helped to ensure that the process moved forward efficiently. At its final meeting in spring 2002, the faculty approved a motion to review the college’s shared governance
structure. In the fall, the faculty executive committee formed a set of guidelines for each standing committee to follow in reviewing its own bylaws, and it established the governance review committee.

The governance review committee began the review process in the winter by holding open faculty forums. It also invited faculty members to send comments in writing, and many impromptu hallway discussions ensued. It quickly became evident that many faculty members saw the process as an opportunity to address a wide set of concerns.

By spring 2003, the governance review committee had presented its first draft of a restructuring plan to the faculty. This interim report included a rationale for the restructuring and a preliminary organizational chart implementing the twofold vision on which the restructuring project would be based. Faculty members were not asked to approve the vision or the chart but merely to "endorse the conclusion of the governance review committee that the faculty committee structure be revised.” Although aspects of the proposed governance structure were controversial, the committee reassured faculty members that they would have ample opportunity for further input and that any bylaws changes would require their two-thirds approval. The committee received support to proceed.

During the summer, the committee began to refine the plan and revise the faculty bylaws, eliminating and combining committees, modifying committee functions, and identifying the need for new committees. A Web site was created to share the committee's documents with the faculty.

The governance review committee was the main attraction at the September 2003 faculty convocation at which it gave a multimedia presentation about its progress. During the fall quarter, committee members met with the newly arrived dean of the college, who expressed support for the vision as well as the process. The members also met with leaders of the student government and the staff council to inform them of the proposal to remove students and staff from some committees while retaining them on others and to strengthen their role in governance through an alternative structure. Staff and students recognized that having only one of their members sitting on a primarily faculty committee did not provide an adequate voice for their concerns. And although they expressed some skepticism, most could see the potential in the restructuring plan for a more meaningful role in the college decision-making process.

Guided by the failure of another of the university’s colleges to revise its faculty bylaws, the governance review committee decided to increase transparency and inclusiveness. The committee gave brief reports at every monthly faculty meeting and disseminated general information about restructuring through e-mail messages and Web postings. In addition, committee members attended special meetings of faculty groups to talk about restructuring with time provided for extended debate. One such meeting, which involved the governance review committee, the faculty executive committee, and the chairs of all sixteen standing committees, was contentious and left some feeling discouraged. Yet it proved important in that the governance review committee learned of the major objections to its plan and where it needed to focus its attention.

In open meetings in winter 2004, some faculty members worried that the new structure would result in a loss of faculty power. Following the meetings, the governance review committee asked key faculty
members to read and critique the first draft of the bylaws, intentionally including those who had been most critical of its efforts. The final version of the proposed restructuring plan incorporated the solicited revisions or presented them as minority opinions. Not only did this approach make everyone feel part of the process and allow participants to take ownership of it, but, more important, it also made the plan better. The governance review committee submitted its final set of proposed bylaws in spring 2004, after which it officially dissolved, recommending that the faculty executive committee form a plan to implement the changes.

Implementation

Implementation occurred between summer 2004 and spring 2005. First, the faculty executive committee formed a subcommittee consisting of its incoming and outgoing chairs, two additional faculty executive committee members, and two members from the governance review committee. This action plan committee began by assessing the consistency between university and state rules and the proposed college faculty bylaws. It focused especially on how best to present the revised bylaws to minimize confusion. The committee members aimed to discuss the revisions in the fall and hoped to complete the restructuring process before a required spring election of committee members. Over the summer, the action plan committee prepared the implementation plan and a transition plan to move from the old to the new bylaws at whatever point they were approved, whether that year or the next.

The college parliamentarian recommended an “in seriatim” process in which our college’s faculty members would consider one point at a time, voting by simple majority to approve an item but not yet enacting it. This process permits past items to be revisited if they are affected by later actions. Once all items are considered, a final vote can be taken to adopt all the approved revisions. This single vote requires a two-thirds majority to enact all the bylaws changes. The members continue to operate under the existing bylaws during deliberations. (See Robert’s Rules of Order for details.)

The action plan committee decided to present the governance review committee’s proposals in a format that would include all comments, positive and negative, received during the prior two years. The action plan document would facilitate the process for voting and implementation and would reflect as much of the debate as possible. Determining in which order proposed changes would be considered was crucial. Before a new type of committee could be considered, a structural holding place in the current organization of the bylaws had to be created.

The process can be likened to creating scaffolding around a building, then modifying within. For example, the committee first added bylaws sections titled “Faculty Committees” and “Multi-Constituent Committees” (initially empty and thus not controversial). Faculty were then asked to approve moving each existing committee’s bylaws to one of these sections, after which those in the faculty committees section were considered for revision. (The bylaws of multiconstituent committees were to be considered in a later review process in consultation with the relevant constituencies.)

In addition, the action plan committee created an addendum of items that needed bylaws changes but had not been addressed in the government review committee’s final proposals. The committee sent drafts of the action plan and the addendum to key faculty members for proofreading. Afterward, it
assembled a color-coded packet and presented a copy to each faculty member at the September 2004 faculty convocation. The packet included the action plan, the addendum, a marked-up copy of the current bylaws showing the governance review committee's proposed changes, a chart comparing the current and proposed governance structures, a parliamentary "crib sheet," and a form for submitting amendments to the proposed changes. (See "The Action Plan.")

At the first fall faculty meeting, a panel of senior faculty members, including one who had helped draft the faculty bylaws when the college was founded, emphasized the importance of faculty governance and summarized the restructuring process. The implementation process was introduced with a brief explanation of each document in the packet faculty had received and of the ground rules for debate and voting. The committee discussed how individuals should prepare for upcoming meetings and noted the need for everyone to adhere strictly to Robert's Rules of Order and to submit any proposed amendments in writing in advance. (Requiring faculty to submit written amendments not only eased record keeping and encouraged faculty to review proposals in advance, but it also all but eliminated wordsmithing on the floor.)

Faculty quickly realized the need to do their homework before coming to meetings, and they soon mastered how to use the documents in their packets. Meetings were characterized by brief, meaningful discussions of items, followed by a vote. Praise for the action plan grew rapidly after the second meeting of the fall quarter, where fifteen items were considered and approved in the twenty minutes allotted for deliberation by the faculty chair. A critical mass of faculty had come to trust the work of the committees involved in the restructuring effort and reached the conclusion that the most important issue was their reasoned vote on each item. The entire process took a total of sixty minutes of meeting time spread over three faculty meetings in fall 2004. At its January 2005 meeting, the faculty unanimously approved the amended bylaws. What could have turned into a never-ending debate, or a struggle in which a vocal minority would seek to subvert the agreed-upon process, instead turned into a source of pride for the faculty.

In spring 2005, we followed our transition plan to elect or appoint faculty members to the new committees. The next phase of restructuring involved creation of a multiconstituent review committee to examine the roles of students, staff, and faculty in shared decision making. We're still in the middle of that process.

**The Road to Unanimity**

The timing of a restructuring process may not be controllable, but it is critical. Individual circumstances will dictate optimal timing. In our case, the imminent departure of a longtime dean and anticipation of new leadership provided the impetus for change. The committee intentionally presented the proposed bylaws at the last faculty meeting of the academic year, leaving little opportunity for contentious debate at such an early point in the final phase of the restructuring process. The summer hiatus provided the necessary time to prepare the action plan documents and allowed faculty to digest the proposed changes. The fall convocation was the perfect time in our culture to begin the deliberation and voting phase.
As the restructuring process unfolded, each report to the faculty indicated a step forward, creating an expectation that change would happen. When fears about changes to individual committees arose, we tried to maintain the status quo as long as it did not compromise the restructuring process. By doing so, we allayed fears and gathered support. For example, the governance review committee concluded that the Study Abroad and Exchange Programs Committee was more of an administrative support group than a true governance body, and we considered eliminating it from the faculty governance structure. But the enthusiastic and productive group of faculty who were its members had initiated the college’s first foray into international studies, and they wanted to remain within the locus of faculty authority. So we included the committee in the faculty-only structure, eliminating its administrative and student members. (The new bylaws permit all committees to consult with students, staff, and other personnel at their discretion.)

When voting on action plan items began, the chair of the faculty set the tone with the first motions. It became clear that editing proposed bylaws from the floor would not be tolerated and would not be necessary unless a substantive issue arose. The few such issues that came up were resolved between meetings, with revisions presented at the following meeting. Faculty were first asked to vote on nontreating items, such as the structure. By the time major issues surfaced, momentum drove the vote to approve. While the parliamentary process we adopted ensured that items need only be approved by a simple majority, nearly every item was approved unanimously. By the time the final vote occurred, the required two-thirds approval was inevitable, with the collegial atmosphere and collective sense of ownership creating unanimity.

Restructuring was an enriching and uniting experience for our college. Senior faculty members were able to share their wisdom and provide leadership; junior faculty members became thoroughly immersed in the topic of governance and had the opportunity to interact with senior faculty colleagues outside of their departments. The process created the expectation that junior faculty members would participate in institutional governance throughout their careers. We are now reaping the benefits of our efforts: a more thoughtfully crafted document to guide our faculty, and a faculty that has a strong sense of its role and responsibilities in shared governance.

**Note**

1. In the college’s governance restructuring process described in this article, Davis chaired the ad hoc governance review committee, Page led the faculty’s executive committee, and both served on a committee that formed an action plan for implementing a new governance model. The committee’s documents are available at [www.rwc.uc.edu/davis/governance](http://www.rwc.uc.edu/davis/governance). Both authors now serve as consultants to their AAUP chapter’s governance reorganization project. [Back to text](#)

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