A Comparison of International Faculty Members' Perceptions of Shared Governance

Michael T Miller[1], Mei-Yan Lu[2,*], Daniel P. Nadler[3]

[1]Department of Educational Leadership
College of Education
San Jose State University
San Jose, U.S.A.

[2]Department of Educational Leadership
College of Education
San Jose State University
San Jose, U.S.A.

[3]Eastern Illinois University
1211 Old Main
600 Lincoln Avenue
Charleston, U.S.A.

[*]Corresponding author's email: mylu1981 [AT] gmail.com

_____

ABSTRACT--- *Shared governance has multiple dimensions of implementation in higher education, ranging from stakeholder input through trustee involvement to students and staff holding positions of representative power to have input into decision making. It has historically been a hallmark of higher education. The current study was developed to extend the Miller and Lu findings and specifically examining mainland Chinese faculty who are resident faculty in their homeland. The findings can have significant impact on understanding the global academy and how faculty perceive their role in higher education.*

Keywords--- higher education, faculty governance, faculty role
_____

1. INTRODUCTION

Shared governance has historically been a hallmark of higher education. The ability of faculty members to debate ideas and concepts and to expose students to differing and challenging perspectives is a critical part of the developmental component of higher education, particularly in the United States, but also around the world. Part of the identification and openness with differing ideas is a campus culture that encourages the civil debate of ideas, and this is particularly true for faculty members and their ability to express ideas, concerns, support, and questioning over institutional direction and decisions (Bowen & Tobin 2015;Gibb, Haskins, & Robertson, 2013; Schoorman& Acker-Hocevar, 2010,). This environment for questioning and speaking out is typically found in a faculty senate or similar governing body where individuals can have a structured and formal platform to share their voices.

Faculty senates and similar structures are common place on most college campuses in the US, andHelms and Price (2005) estimated nearly 80% of all four-year colleges and universities have a formally defined faculty governance body. These bodies are often charged with specific activities and tasks, and are allowed authority to make decisions and recommendations on certain types of issues. They have been challenged in recent years based on their ability to impact institutional decision-making, yet they remain a key factor in making academic decisions if for no other reason than to build consensus among faculty on changes impacting the campus (Helms & Price, 2005).

Part of the argument about how faculty senates have grown and to some extent flourished in American higher education has been linked to the democratic form of government, where voting and consensus are important parts of public agency decision making (Miller & Lu, 2005). Further, faculty members who participate in the democratic process in their public life have an expectation that they will also have some participation in making decisions in their professional life of public service. Subsequently, there is some consistent thinking that faculty participate in shared governance because it is an extension of their culture realizing democracy in higher education is important (Schoorman& Acker-Hocevar, 2010; Weissberg, 1998), and that as international faculty become more commonplace on college campuses (Mamiseishvili& Rosser, 2009), there may be an erosion of participation levels due to different acculturation patterns among faculty. The examination by Miller and Lu in the early-2000s provided an initial documentation of this effect, generally noting a pattern of differences for faculty coming from mainland China. Their findings suggested that faculty expected to be involved in decision-making, but that they expected no real access to power.

The current study was developed to extend the Miller and Lu findings and specifically look at mainland Chinese faculty who are resident faculty in their homeland rather immigrating to US institutions. These findings can have a significant impact on understanding the global academy and how faculty see their role in challenging decision-making for the sake of academic freedom.

2. BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

Shared governance has multiple dimensions of implementation in higher education, ranging from stakeholder input through trustee involvement to students and staff holding positions of representative power to have input into decision making (Evans, 1999; Stensaker, &Vabø, 2013). Faculty governance, however, has perhaps the longest tradition in higher education, dating to the earliest European institutions where they had prominent roles in every aspect of the institutions management. In this historical context, faculty decided what would be taught, when, and to whom (Pepper et al. , 2012; Rosser, 2003). Much of this empowerment was based on the size and sophistication of the institution, and as colleges and universities have expanded both their size and mission, faculty members have become more specialized in what they can have access to in terms of making decisions.

Faculty involvement in decision making has been linked to stronger and more positive feelings about teaching and working with students, and generally improved feelings of work place satisfaction (Evans, 1999; Schick, 2014). This involvement is one approach to encouraging shared governance, as it has the potential to increase feelings of ownership and organizational commitment through collaborative problem solving, planning, and decision-making. Similarly, shared governance can impact the range of options identified to solve problems, and is often seen as a key element in making institutional decisions that are broadly accepted in times of difficulty (Miller, 2003). An assumption, however, is that shared decision-making is a cultural expectation, an outgrowth of the academic environment where curiosity, questioning, and challenging ideas is fundamental to the academic process (Hendrickson, Lane, Harris, & Dorman, 2013). By moving faculty into a managed professional context, there is the potential to reduce faculty members' ability to think creatively about problem solving, and ultimately, can lead to lessened opportunities for creative approaches to instruction and less questioning of what might be deemed as accepted societal thinking. In essence, to be a faculty member is to question existing knowledge, to challenge conventional thinking, and to pursue different ways of thinking and knowing about specific disciplines.

A critical component of shared decision making must be a faculty member's (or student, staff, or trustee) ability to challenge conventional thinking, deconstruct problems, and make meaningful recommendations about a given topic, academic understanding, theory, etc. Part of the American society is presumably that citizens can do these very same things based on their freedoms, and that creating an environment or culture that allows for such questioning can lead to more advances in cultural understanding, scientific discovery, business development, etc. (Melear, 2013). So as new faculty join the academy, their willingness to challenge conventional thinking is paramount to the system of American higher education. New faculty coming to US institutions from different cultural environments has the potential to alter this assumption about questioning, and this led to the initial 2005 study by Miller and Lu about Chinese faculty.

China is currently led by the Politburo Standing Committee of the Communist Party of China, a leadership of the communist party that is based on communal ownership of property. In addition to questions of ownership, the party is dedicated to creating a classless society without capitalist oppression and an equal valuing of all workers (Taylor, 2011). From an ideological point of view, the party sees all individuals as having value in work, yet there is no view of hierarchy among workers. These ideas are present within the university setting and direct the creation of curriculum, although a review of various institutional websites does show a variation of academic titles, suggesting that at the very least the vernacular of western higher education has become a part of the Chinese academic culture.

The broad concept examined in the current study is whether or not the academic cultural environment within a communist country allows for the idea of shared governance, a finding that has the potential to lead to a greater understanding of both global higher education and the evolution and future of Chinese higher education and American colleges and universities that employ Chinese faculty.

3. RESEARCH METHODS

Survey. The survey instrument used in data collection was a portion of the National Data Base on Faculty Involvement in Governance Survey, specifically the 19 items comprising the perceptions of faculty shared governance and the 12 items on the motivation to be involved in faculty shared governance. The survey was initially developed in the early-1990s and has been administered over 50 times (Miller, 2003). The survey provides opportunities for respondents to rate their level of agreement on the items using a 1-to-5 Likert-type scale (5=strong agreement progressing to 1=Strong disagreement), and reliability indices for the administration of the survey has typically exceeded .6500.

Initial data collection. The current study conceptually replicates the Miller and Lu (2005) study of college faculty members who grew up and were acculturated in an environment that did not have a democratic form of government in place. The initial data collection with 200 Chinese-American faculty members utilized a snow-balling technique, and the 143 respondents were all mainland Chinese faculty members who were teaching at American college and universities. The results of these faculty members responses was that they "as a group, [were] less focused on personal ambition and using the senate ore elected body for some specific purpose, but rather were seen as default participants, those who were asked to serve and did so" (Miller & Lu, 2005, p. 15).

Chinese faculty participants. The sample of international faculty for the current study were mainland Chinese faculty members in fields representing the social sciences. These faculty members were participating in a residential intensive English language program sponsored by a midwestern United States university, and participants were in their sixth week of language study in an eight-week program. These individuals came from three different universities and all held academic titles of assistant, associate, or full professor and were most commonly teaching in Education related fields (including teacher education, educational leadership, special education, and educational psychology). The survey was administered to these individuals in a paper-and-pencil format during the later-part of one of the language training classes. The survey was introduced by a member of the research team, but was administered by the language instructor who served as a resource to participants in understanding questionnaire items if the participants had any questions about the content's meaning. There were 110 potential participants, although 101 completed the survey due to several faculty members' absence.

National data collection. The survey was initially distributed to a cross section of colleges and universities throughout the United States between 1994 and 2005. The project, termed the National Data Base on Faculty Involvement in Governance, was originally housed at the University of Alabama and sought to understand the role of college faculty in shared decision-making on academic and academically-related matters. The survey was primarily administered in a pencil-and-paper format, although nearly 500 surveys were administered in an online format. A total of 3,400 American college faculty members from community colleges, private universities, and public colleges and universities participated in the data collection efforts.

4. FINDINGS

For the current study, 165 new participants completed the survey instrument in the summer of 2015, including 101 Chinese faculty who were visiting the United States, and 64 full-time, tenure/tenure-track faculty from the institution where the Chinese faculty were visiting. The 64 US faculty were included simply as a point of illumination, to demonstrate whether the US institution was an aberration from national averages, and to lend understanding to the type of environment that the Chinese faculty were visiting.

The first step in the analysis of responses was the comparison of mainland Chinese faculty who were in the US in 2006 as compared to those who were in the US in 2015. As shown in Table 1, of the 18 perceptions about shared governance, the 2015 cohort had higher mean averages on all items except for five, and of those five, three were reversed coded items, and meaning that the 2015 cohort truly had more positive perceptions of shared governance elements on 13 of 18 items. The items where there was the largest gain in positive perception were: a .28 decrease in the mean rating that *governance body leaders are not well prepared*; a .18 increase on the *governance body operates efficiently*; a .15 increase on *academic administrators and governance body leaders have the same expectations*; and a .14 increase on the perception that the *governance body attracts the most capable people as members*. For the reverse coded items, reflecting a change in perceptions tending to the negative, the largest changes were a .33 increase in the mean rating of *the issues considered by our governance body are not important*; a .25 increase in the perception *that it is difficult to get people to serve on the governance body*; and a .10 increase in the perception that *faculty members are not adequately rewarded for their participation*.

The grand mean for the 18 items for the 2015 Chinese cohort was 3.84, and for the 2015 US cohort the grand mean was 3.92, and an Analysis of Variance at the .05 level identified no significant difference between the two groups of scores. Due to sample size differences, a statistical analysis was not used to compare the 2015 cohort and the on-going data collection activities that comprise the national average of rating the perceptions of shared governance. The national average ratings included completed surveys from the mid-1990's to present. For the 18 perception statements, the national average mean scores for US faculty were higher on half of the statements (n=8; see Table 1), and the differences in ratings ranged from .01 to .70, with an average difference of .22.

Faculty were also asked to identify what they believed to be the primary motivation for faculty members to be involved in shared governance activities. In the initial 2006 survey, Chinese faculty members' mean scores were the highest (strongest agreement) with *responsibility* (mean 4.61), *importance of decision making* (4.44), *asked to serve* (4.20), and a *sense of professionalism* (4.15). For the 2015 cohort of Chinese faculty, despite five higher mean scores for 2015 responses, the same four motivators had the highest mean scores (see Table 2). Three of the four items identified by the 2006 and 2015 cohort were included in those identified with the most agreement on the national average listing, with the one exception being the highest mean average for the national average being *empowerment* (mean 4.68, 2006 mean 3.5, 2015 mean 2015) and *sense of professionalism* was not included. Similarly, the lowest mean ratings for both the 2015 and 2006 cohort of Chinese faculty were serving to fulfill *self-interests* (2.80 for 2015; 3.00 for 2006), and to *create a communal atmosphere* (3.00 for 2015; 3.08 for 2006). The *self-interest* motivator was also the lowest mean score for the national average of faculty (3.00), but the second lowest mean rating for the national faculty was a personal *quest for knowledge* (3.24).

5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Findings of the study continue to demonstrate a sense by Chinese faculty that they are serving because of an expectation (eg, asked to serve, professionalism, relationship with administration), rather than serving to challenge group thinking on campus (possibly represented by motivators such as empowerment). This could mean that despite an

opening of the Chinese economy and a larger presence on the world stage of trade, faculty members remain in a managed profession with less academic freedom both in and outside of the classroom.

The number of more positive ratings of shared governance in 2015 may indicate that there are stronger feelings of academic freedom, or at least academic self-determination than eight years ago. This could be a result of the maturation of the Chinese higher education industry, and loosening of Chinese oversight of the academic enterprise, or even the broader exposure of Chinese faculty to different ways of thinking about higher education. Any of these could be aided in part by the power of the digital world, where faculty members in almost any country can access journal articles and research and study results, both activities that were extremely limited two decades ago.

Perhaps one of the most interesting findings of the study is the similarity of perceptions about who tends to get involved in shared governance activities. Nationally, in the United States, there has historically been a perception that it is difficult to get faculty members to commit to serving on bodies such as a faculty senate, and somewhat moderate perceptions that the most capable faculty are recruited to participate. The same trends seem to hold true in China, where they claimed that it is hard to get faculty members involved, and there is only moderate agreement that these individuals are indeed the most capable. This may speak to the entire process of shared governance and the long standing question of how to best reward participation; this is an issue that seems to transcend nationality.

Overall, findings suggest that while there are some differences between faculty members from democratic and non-democratic governments, there are also some strong similarities about the functioning, uses, and application of shared academic governance. These consistencies might suggest that the academy serves as a primary environment for cultural development and attracts certain types of individuals with its lifestyle, work, and reward system. Further, the frustrations noted in shared governance in terms of respect, dealing with important issues, and efficiency were all found to be similar across nationalities possibly suggesting that the process of shared governance is something that needs significant attention to improve through research and strategic thinking. Findings also suggested that further research is needed to develop a deeper understanding of why individuals chose to become involved in shared governance and what types of rewards can serve as a catalyst to attract the best and most talented faculty to the faculty senate.

6. REFERENCES

- Bowen, W. G., & Tobin, E. M. (2015). *Locus of Authority: The Evolution of Faculty Roles in the Governance of Higher Education*. Princeton University Press.

- Evans, J. P. (1999). Benefits and barriers to shared governance. In M. T. Miller (ed.), *Responsive Academic Decision Making, Involving Faculty in Higher Education Governance* (pp. 29-54). Stillwater, OK: New Forums.

- Gibb, A., Haskins, G., & Robertson, I. (2013). Leading the entrepreneurial university: Meeting the entrepreneurial development needs of higher education institutions. In *Universities in Change* (pp. 9-45).Springer New York.

- Helms, R. M., & Price, T. (2005). Who needs a faculty senate? *Academe, 91*(6), 34-36.

- Hendrickson, R. M., Lane, J. E., Harris, J. T., & Dorman, R. H. (2013). *Academic leadership and governance of higher education*. Sterling, VA: Stylus.

- Mamiseishvili, K., & Rosser, V. (2009). International and citizen faculty in the United States: An examination of their productivity at research universities. *Research in Higher Education, 51*(1), 1-20.

- Melear, K. B. (2013). The role of internal governance, committees, and advisory groups. In P. J. Schloss and K. M. Cragg (eds.), *Organization and Administration of Higher Education* (pp. 50-65). New York, NY: Routledge.

- Miller, M. T. (2003).*Improving faculty governance, cultivating leadership and collaboration in decision making*. Stillwater, OK: New Forums.

- Miller, M. T., & Lu, M. Y.(2005, February).*Comparison of historically non-democratic nationality faculty in democratic decision-making in US higher education institutions*. Research paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Society for Cross Cultural Research, Santa Fe, New Mexico.

- Pepper, R. E., Chasteen, S. V., Pollock, S. J., Perkins, K. K., Rebello, N. S., Engelhardt, P. V., & Singh, C. (2012, February). Facilitating faculty conversations: Development of consensus learning goals. In *AIP Conference Proceedings-American Institute of Physics* (Vol. 1413, No. 1, p. 291).

- Rosser, V. J. (2003).*Historical overview of faculty governance in higher education*.In M. T. Miller and J. Caplow (eds.), Policy and University Faculty Governance (pp. 3 – 18). Greenwich, CT: Information Age.

- Schick, E. B. (2014). Shared Visions of Public Higher Education Governance: Structures and Leadership Styles That Work.

- Schoorman, D., & Acker-Hocevar, M. (2010). Viewing faculty governance within a social justice framework: Struggles and possibilities for democratic decision-making in higher education. *Equity & Excellence in Education, 43*(3), 310-325.

- Stensaker, B., &Vabø, A. (2013). Re-inventing shared governance: Implications for organisational culture and institutional leadership. *Higher Education Quarterly*, *67*(3), 256-274.

- Taylor, S. L. (Ed.). (2011). *30-second politics*. New York, NY: Metro Books.

- Weissberg, R. (1998). Democracy and the academy.*Policy Studies Review, 15*(4), 1-3.

Table 1: *Perceptions of Faculty Shared Governance*

Characteristic	Chinese Fac 2006 n=143	Chinese Fac 2015 n=101	US Fac 2015 n=64	Natl Avg N=3421
Governance body adequately represents the faculty point of view	3.96	3.99	4.45	4.34
Governance body practices adhere to the guidelines set forth in its constitution and bylaws	4.11	4.18	4.25	4.20
It is difficult to get people to serve on governance body standing and/or ad hoc committees	4.12	4.37	4.50	4.15
Our governance body is not well represented on committees making decisions on policy, planning, and allocation of resources	3.67	3.75	4.26	4.10
Faculty members are not adequately rewarded for their participation in the governance process	4.00	4.10	4.14	4.09
The governance body operates efficiently	3.71	3.89	3.80	3.99
The governance body's operating budget is adequate	3.88	3.89	4.01	4.00
Communication is good betweenthe governance body and academic administrators	4.18	4.25	4.20	3.99
Governance body members andacademic administrators meet regularly	4.40	4.47	4.00	3.91
The governance body does nothave sufficient information to base its decisions	3.96	3.95	3.87	3.64
Communication is good Between the governance body and university trustees	3.45	3.40	3.66	3.68
The governance body is involved in important decisions about the way the institution is run	3.50	3.52	3.57	3.60

(table continues)
Table 1, continued

Characteristic	Chinese Fac 2006 n=143	Chinese Fac 2015 n=101	US Fac 2015 n=64	Natl Avg N=3421
Academic administrators andgovernance body expectations regarding the governance bodyare the same	3.60	3.75	4.00	3.57
We have no difficulty getting a quorum at governance body meetings	3.49	3.41	3.80	3.46
The governance body attractsthe most capable people as members	3.81	3.95	3.88	3.42
Management information is readily provided to the governance body	3.26	3.15	3.37	3.34
Our governance body leaders are not well prepared	3.50	3.22	3.44	3.21
The issues considered by our governance body are not important	3.50	3.88	3.51	3.18

Table 2 : Motivation for Involvement in Faculty Governance

Motive	Chinese Fac 2006 n=143	Chinese Fac 2015 n=101	US Fac 2015 n=64	Nat'l Avg N=3421
Empowerment	3.50	3.89	4.80	4.68
Sense of responsibility	4.61	4.89	4.50	4.45
Importance of decision-Making	4.44	4.50	4.37	4.24
Asked to serve/be involved	4.20	4.63	4.01	4.20
Sense of professionalism	4.15	4.10	4.22	4.03
Sense of ownership	3.88	3.75	3.99	3.93
Environment on campus	3.55	3.50	3.85	3.74
Relationship with Administration	3.86	4.00	3.84	3.69
Communal atmosphere	3.08	3.00	4.00	3.75
Attitude toward students	3.50	3.50	3.76	3.50
Quest for knowledge	3.47	3.26	3.51	3.24
Self-interest	3.00	2.80	2.99	3.00