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MODELS OF CURRICULUM GOVERNANCE: A RESEARCH AGENDA

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Introduction

This paper proposes an agenda for researching current models of higher education curriculum governance at the institutional and state levels, and notes several emerging trends that have the potential to alter the faculty role in curricular decisions. Scholarship on higher education governance and on the college curriculum both assign primary responsibility for curricular decisions to the faculty. Likewise, both bodies of literature place quality instruction at the pinnacle among higher education missions, or at very least on equal footing with research. Ironically, scholars of governance and curriculum largely have neglected to study patterns of curriculum governance. Campuses and state higher education systems vary greatly in their structures for planning, approving, and reviewing curricula. In an attempt to extend knowledge of curriculum development from individual course planning to group processes, researchers have begun to study curricular decision making at the program level (Briggs, Stark, and Rowland-Poplowski, in press). However, in the absence of empirical study, discussion of institutional level curricular decision making is largely limited to unflattering anecdotes characterizing it as inefficient, change resistant, and highly political. State higher education boards that play an activist role in curriculum change are frequently portrayed as intrusive, zealous, and also highly political.

To date, scholars have not surveyed and classified curriculum governance structures throughout US higher education, nor compared their effectiveness and efficiency to achieve curriculum decisions that meet the needs of stakeholders. Little is known about models that effectively integrate curriculum planning at the departmental level with planning at the

institutional and state system levels. In the wake of numerous reports and editorials critical of the college curriculum, academic leaders have called on faculties to reform themselves and become more responsive to societal needs lest administrations or external parties impose undesired changes on them. The result on many campuses has been ad hoc committees charged with exploring one or another aspect of the curriculum to recommend possible reforms. How campuses might improve systems to ensure ongoing curriculum review and renewal has received much less attention than have proposals for specific reforms. Models that effectively integrate not only various levels of curriculum planning, but also planning with review and renewal efforts could be particularly beneficial if documented and disseminated more widely. In addition, distance learning, educational entrepreneurialism, articulation agreements, employment of part-time and adjunct faculty, external grants for curricular initiatives, and various mandates by accreditors and state authorities all have implications for faculty governance of the curriculum that warrant consideration.

Background

If you ask faculty members and department chairs about curricular decision making at their institutions, as my colleagues and I recently have, they likely will tell you "the curriculum belongs to the faculty." Most department chairs in our study told us their deans neither play a significant role in curricular matters nor communicate any expectations to chairs regarding what role the chair ought to play (Stark, Briggs, & Rowland-Poplowski, 2000a). Faculty members and department chairs often criticized central administrations that had initiated efforts having curricular implications such as integrating technology into classroom learning. Even

within individual departments, both faculty members and department chairs strongly distinguished between the purview of the faculty and that of the chair to influence curricular priorities or determine which curricular proposals may move forward (Stark, Briggs & Rowland-Poplowski, 2000b, in press).

Our finding that department chairs and faculty members consider curriculum the purview of the faculty should come as no surprise to anyone who has spent significant time on a college or university campus. This sentiment abounds in books, articles, and institutional documents about curriculum, faculty roles and governance, often accompanied by a reference to the *Statement on Government of Colleges and Universities* ratified by the AAUP, ACE, and AGB in 1966 (AAUP/ACE/AGB). As Toombs and Tierney (1991) have noted, expertise serves as the premise for faculty jurisdiction over the curriculum. Faculty members and administrators alike commonly assert that only faculty members have the expert knowledge of their subjects necessary to make curricular decisions. At institutions that delegate curriculum approval to individual schools, faculty senates may reserve the right to involve themselves in campuswide curricular issues. Nonetheless, they may strongly prefer to leave all but a very few issues to the faculty of the school immediately responsible for the curriculum in question. While institutions may draw the line between general and discipline- or school specific curricular concerns in different places, the extent of specialized expertise required to make the decision remains a common guiding principle in such jurisdictional determinations.

From our national study of curriculum decision making in 44 academic departments in a wide variety of fields and institution types, we learned of varied curriculum governance structures at the departmental, school, institutional, and state system levels. At the departmental level, for instance, larger faculties with greater specialization were more likely than smaller,

more conceptually cohesive groups to rely on one or more curriculum committees to review curricula and develop proposals for new courses and programs (Stark, Briggs, Rowland-Poplawski, in press). Departments and institutions devoted primarily to professional preparation were more likely than those with a liberal arts mission to have formalized systems of ongoing curriculum review and renewal (Briggs, 2001). Because our study focused on program level curriculum decision making, however, we did not systematically gather information about institutional and state levels of curriculum governance. Still, some of the differences we encountered are worth mentioning. In particular, while most programs were required to seek approval for proposals above the level of their own departments, some required only one additional layer of approval, while others required up to four additional stamps of approval, with the ultimate determination made by a governance body at the state system level. In at least one state university system, departments seeking approval for a curricular proposal were required to receive consent from a system-level administrator who acts as a consultant to them as they prepare their proposals to fit the system's mandatory instructional design template.

Because we purposely selected departments to study that might be exemplary program planners our sample may not have captured the complete array of curricular governance models that exist in US institutions and public systems of higher education. On the other hand, the existence of such variety even among a limited number of exemplary departments suggests that the diversity that marks the American higher education enterprise extends to the realm of curricular governance, and that effective models may differ with local missions and contexts.

Literature Review

Beyond the generalizations and few examples offered above, only a small amount has been written about models of curriculum governance in American higher education today. Popular books in which senior academics explain how colleges and universities operate (Birnbaum 1988; Rosovsky, 1990; Balderston, 1995; Kennedy, 1997) invariably discuss institutional governance, but generally neglect to describe how the academic mission is shaped through curriculum governance processes. Edited volumes devoted to higher education governance (Birnbaum, 1983, 1991; Schuster, Miller & Associates, 1989; Peterson, Chaffee & White, 1991; Brown, 2000) include chapters about, or at least touching on, the subject of faculty senates (from which campuswide curriculum committees often emanate), however, they seldom if ever describe the curriculum governance function in any detail, let alone the diversity of structures institutions may employ for carrying it out.

Similarly, few if any of the major books or edited volumes about the college curriculum has dealt explicitly with curriculum committees, approval systems or other aspects of curriculum governance (Levin, 1978; Conrad, 1985, 1987; Conrad and Haworth, 1990, 1995; Gaff, Ratcliff & Associates, 1996; Stark and Lattuca 1997). While curriculum scholars have increasingly defined curriculum development as a decision-making process (Briggs, 2001), they have tended to rely on innovation and change theories, defined by constructs such as awareness, adaptation and adoption (Stark and Lattuca), rather than governance theories. Curriculum scholars have seldom discussed their subject in terms of the typical triumvirate of collegiate governance models--collegial, bureaucratic, and political. Among curriculum scholars, Conrad (1978) and Stark and Lattuca perhaps have come closest to defining

curriculum development as a governance issue, although still only to a very limited extent. Conrad developed a grounded theory of academic change that identified interest group conflict and negotiation, particularly between faculty and administration, at the heart of curricular decision making. Drawing from political science, his theory achieves a level of empirically supported abstraction that is lacking in much curriculum scholarship, but which also forgoes descriptive details about specific curriculum decision-making structures or processes. Other scholars have described curriculum decision making in terms of cultural domination, conflict and compromise among gender, racial, or disciplinary subcultures (Anderson, 1987; Higginbotham, 1990; Butler, 1991; Gumport, 1988), however their work has seldom been empirical or focused on formal governance processes. In discussing collegewide curriculum change processes, Stark and Lattuca, however, have been somewhat more specific about governance structures by noted that:

In the small liberal arts college, the entire faculty and administration typically debate changes in collegewide plans or mission in a committee of the whole, with the president or vice president chairing the meeting. In contrast, in the liberal arts unit within a large university, plans may be formulated by a blue-ribbon panel and presented to a representative governing body that acts on behalf of the faculty. (p. 130)

In addition, they speculate that:

Enterprising fields with highly structured curricula (e.g., engineering, business) might delegate collegewide curriculum decisions to committees, while human-oriented fields with loosely structured paradigms (e.g., nursing, social work) might have much broader faculty involvement. (p. 130)

Another place one might look for literature related to curriculum governance is among scholarship on evaluation and assessment. Where it exists, systematic program review initiated by an institution or state coordinating board might be viewed as an aspect of curriculum governance. However, in our study of exemplary academic departments, faculty members often were uncertain if their institution had such a system, or reported that one existed "on the books" but had not been implemented according to its specified schedule in recent years. In large departments that did undertake periodic program review, faculty members often described it as an information-compiling task carried out by the chair or one designated faculty member primarily to satisfy an external authority, and arousing little involvement or interest among others. Only occasionally did participants in our study report genuine group participation in program self-studies that they, as a department, valued and made use of to inform curricular decisions. Still, the prevalence and means by which program review is integrated into curriculum governance has yet to be documented in any systematic and comprehensive way, thus our findings from exemplary departments should be accepted only as tentative observations.

The absence of scholarship on curriculum governance may stem from the nature of curriculum development itself. As Toombs and Tierney (1991) have noted, and Stark and Lattuca (1997) have amply documented, college curricula are largely the creation of individual faculty members working alone to design and revise their own courses. To say that curriculum belongs to the faculty leaves ambiguous whether that role is individual or collective. To refer to this role in the context of collegiate governance, however, implies that it is not only a faculty right but a responsibility, and one that the faculty as a corporate body ultimately must ensure is carried out to standards worthy of the whole. Yet again, there remains ambiguity concerning

the extent to which the responsibility of the faculty is to make actual decisions as a whole or to merely monitor the quality of curricular decisions made by individual or small groups of faculty peers.

Even more important is the question to what extent the faculty's collective responsibility is to monitor for problems or to encourage and facilitate improvement. Our study of exemplary departments found that institutional and state curriculum approval systems are often designed as quality control rather than quality development mechanisms, slowing down implementation of many good proposals in the name of preventing a few poor ones from slipping into the catalog. At worst, these systems greatly reduce institutional responsiveness and dampen faculty motivation to innovate. At best, these systems are relatively efficient and benign, but offer little "added value" to the curriculum development process. Every so often, however, participants in our study described systems they felt gave them valuable feedback to improve their curriculum plans rather than merely giving them a thumbs up or thumbs down. Those who design curriculum governance structures should consider whether their processes help departments develop curricular plans more thoughtfully or merely document them more painstakingly. The process to implement curricular renewal should not be more difficult than the process to continue an existing course or program without genuine reassessment, which is often now the case. Curriculum committees of faculty senates, for instance, may often operate politically, expediently, or even totally pro forma. However, curriculum governance structures that are truly worthy of praise ensure--as much as possible--that educational responsiveness and quality trump stagnation as the path of least resistance and most reward. These are the types of curriculum governance models that should be identified, studied, and disseminated to a wider audience of scholars and practitioners.

In addition, my own research (Briggs, 2001) suggests that faculty who serve on curriculum committees may need greater curriculum expertise than many currently possess to do their jobs well. Expertise is a critical contributor to good decision making that governance structures must take into account to be effective. Therefore, to understand and potentially improve curriculum governance, research is needed about not only the structures and processes but the knowledge and skills necessary for expert curriculum governance. More fundamentally, a change in curricular governance calls for a change in the way we prepare future faculty and provide for ongoing faculty development. My research suggests that in departments that have elevated curriculum development to a central group responsibility "curriculum expertise" and "curriculum discourse" are vital aspects of faculty identity and sense of professional duty. Questions about expertise and professional preparation are therefore a vital part of a sound research agenda for curriculum governance.

Likewise, effective faculty governance of the curriculum will depend on effective curriculum leadership and curriculum collaboration as a foundation. Through our research, my colleagues and I have begun to identify models of curriculum leadership (Stark, Briggs, & Rowland-Poplowski, in press, 2000b) and collaboration (Briggs, Stark & Rowland-Poplowski, 1999) in a variety of institutional and disciplinary contexts. It is fine to recommend better leadership and more collaboration in curricular matters, but faculty and academic administrators need concrete examples of how others have successfully operationalized these concepts. This too must be included in a research agenda for curriculum governance.

The section that follows outlines, through a series of key questions, a research agenda for studying the diversity of curriculum governance structures that currently exist in US higher education, identifying models that are particularly effective within different institutional and

state contexts, and suggesting successful strategies for meeting the professional development needs of those who participate in curriculum governance.

Research Questions

Scholarship about governance in general tends toward theoretical questions applied to anecdotal data. The purpose of the research agenda outlined below is to direct scholarship about curriculum governance toward empirical research that can answer useful questions and improve practice. As such, the research proposed is largely descriptive--What kind of curriculum governance models exist? Which ones work well? Which ones do not? Once these questions are answered, practitioners can begin to improve their own systems of curriculum governance, while scholars grapple with the "deeper" theoretical questions of cause and prediction, and comparisons to other domains of human endeavor to create and manage social outcomes.

Purposes

- What specifically are curriculum governance systems designed to accomplish or assumed to do to ensure? How comprehensive a view of curriculum and curriculum governance do they reflect? For instance, do they include reevaluation of existing curricula or only approval of proposals for new or revised curricula? Which aspects of curriculum are they designed to govern?
- What criteria and standards do curriculum governance systems consider for measuring progress toward their goals? Or in the absence of such criteria, how do they know when the system is not working well?
- Who are the key constituents to be served by improving curriculum decision making? The curriculum governance system needs to balance the needs of individual faculty members, differing groups of faculty, students and others (employers, community, transfer institutions).

Structures and Processes

- What curriculum governance structures and processes do institutions and state higher education systems in the US employ? What committee and reporting structures do they incorporate? How is authority delegated/distributed and agenda setting accomplished, i.e., what is the role of each committee or other player in the governance structure?
- What formal and informal processes (or "styles" of governance) define curriculum decision making and how do these governance processes relate to governance structures?
- How do institutional and state system attributes such as size, complexity, control, resource levels, history and culture relate to differences in curriculum governance structures and processes?

Good Practice Viewed in Context

- How satisfied are faculty and various other stakeholders with the performance of their curriculum governance system? How valuable is its contribution to the quality of educational experiences?
- How do curriculum governance models and outcomes at universities where there is an overarching faculty senate curriculum committee compare to those where there is not? Is the overarching committee essential or is it possible to devise a way to maintain faculty control and yet delegate more fully to schools and colleges where subject matter expertise exists? What is gained or lost by having an institutional level of curriculum governance? How do the answers to these questions vary with the institutional or state context?
- How do curriculum governance models and outcomes in public higher education systems where there is an overarching state curriculum oversight structure compare to those where there is not? What is gained or lost by having a state system level of curriculum governance? How do the answers to these questions vary with the institutional and state contexts?
- Few within academe would disagree that faculty must have key responsibility (autonomy) in developing curricula and teaching strategies. But there is a tension between autonomy and bureaucracy which sometimes makes faculty members less than eager to participate in this type of decision making. When is bureaucracy (within and without of faculty senates) necessary and appropriate? When should it be reconsidered in light of disciplinary differences?
- Are there especially effective models for integrating curriculum governance with ongoing departmental, institutional and state planning? Are there particularly successful curriculum governance models for drawing together faculty, staff, and administrative expertise through joint committees or other means?

- Are there especially successful models for involving stakeholders (students, employers, community, transfer institutions) in curriculum governance?
- What models exist for involving personnel who have especially rich curricular expertise, such as learning or instructional design staff?

Preparing Those Who Govern the Curriculum

- What do those who participate in curriculum governance need to know and be able to perform their roles effectively? What are the attributes of good curriculum planning, leadership, collaboration, and decision making?
- What does research about curriculum planning and collegiate governance suggest are the pertinent areas of expertise that faculty members need to master to govern the curriculum effectively?
- What kind of expertise exists in the most exemplary systems of curriculum governance, and how did individuals (or the system as a whole) acquire that expertise?
- Are there professional or consortial discourse communities, locally or nationally, that currently support improved curriculum governance by fostering pertinent expertise and sharing germane information and ideas? What opportunities exist for increasing such discourse and making it more useful?
- How might programs for graduate students or new faculty members educate them to most ably fulfill curriculum governance roles and socialize them to view curriculum governance as a vital professional responsibility?

Emerging Issues and Trends

Perhaps the high water mark for scholarship about faculty governance was during and immediately after the social upheaval of the 1960s and early '70s when students and faculty each demanded substantially increased roles in campus decision making. As we find ourselves again in a period of accelerated social and technological change that is coupled, since the fall of 2001, with significant economic constraint, the question of curriculum development as a matter of faculty governance becomes increasingly important. However, much has changed in the past

three decades to make the task of cataloging and studying curriculum governance more difficult than it might have been in earlier decades. According to organizational scholar Marvin Peterson (1997), the higher education industry as a distinct social institution, with stable participants and clear boundaries, has transformed into a postsecondary knowledge industry swarming with a highly eclectic array of providers, products and services. Organizational structures are evolving to adapt to these new conditions, and sometimes are erected and dismantled hastily to meet temporary needs. Boundaries between institutions, their partners, and their environments are often blurred and may be transient. Consequently, there is a risk that a study of formal curriculum governance structures may overlook informal or ad hoc processes that either complement formal systems by diverting certain issues to more appropriate faculty groups, or circumvent faculty advice and consent altogether. One thing is clear, however: slow or inflexible curriculum governance systems may be particularly detrimental to the mission of most institutions to meet emerging societal needs.

In recent years a number of issues and trends have emerged that are particularly likely to have implications for faculty governance of the curriculum. Some state governing bodies have proposed distance learning clearinghouses (Argetsinger, 2001), or have established for-profit distance learning enterprises (Carr, 2000) that raise serious questions about the right and responsibility of faculty to determine appropriate admission standards and degree requirements. Indeed, at a time when education leaders have urged faculty to be far more intentional in their design of cohesive educational programs, such proposals appear to belie the need for any faculty involvement in the design of appropriate course sequences and supplemental experiences.

For-profit educational providers frequently limit the role of instructional faculty in curricular decision making. Some have said that the for-profit providers are unbundling faculty roles, since a single individual no longer researches, designs, and implements a new course. Instead curriculum consultants might research and write course outlines, instructional design experts might develop associated course materials, and numerous instructional faculty might implement the same curricula and use standardized tests to evaluate student performance. Simultaneously, an increasing number of institutions have begun to engage in their own academic entrepreneurialism, competing with for-profit providers and tailoring programs to the requirements of particular corporate clients (Marchese, 1998; Irby, 1999; Carnevale, 2002). Because "just in time" education requires more rapid implementation of new curricula than traditional faculty groups often are accustomed and organized to provide (Armstrong, 2000), independent units may take on this responsibility even for subject matter already offered in existing academic departments. How these new entrepreneurial programs and units relate to the traditional curriculum, and whether or not they should be integrated into existing curriculum governance structures or allowed to grow their own independent oversight systems are important questions.

Efforts to improve articulation agreements to reduce barriers to transfer are nothing new, particularly between two- and four-year institutions within individual state systems. When state budgets are tight, such efforts may take on a greater sense of urgency as state systems seek to reduce program redundancy at the same time a weak job market convinces more high school graduates to view college as a necessity. Articulation agreements are a significant area of curricular decision-making. As such, they have received little attention from scholars and clearly deserve consideration in the context of curriculum governance.

The increased use of part-time faculty (Gappa & Leslie, 1993) and the replacement by some institutions of tenure lines with time-limited contracts (Chait & Trower, 1998) have raised concerns about whether there will be enough qualified professors eligible to perform faculty governance functions, including those performed by curriculum committees. On the other hand, part-time instructors who are employed by several institutions may be a particularly rich source of information about curricular alternatives (Briggs, 2001). Yet, it appears rare that departmental or campuswide curriculum committees tap part-time instructors as a resource for new ideas or comparative perspectives.

While state boards and accrediting associations generally insist on faculty involvement in curriculum decision making, they also may require student outcomes assessment or specific additions to the curriculum, which are often viewed by faculty as "external mandates." A number of states, all regional accrediting bodies, and many specialized accrediting associations now require outcomes assessment by their member institutions or departments. The New York Board of Regents recently moved to require a core undergraduate course in Western history (personal correspondence, 1999), and the American Chemical Society now requires biochemistry as a component of approved undergraduate chemistry programs (personal correspondence, 1999). While few would argue that public institutions should be held accountable in some fashion for the quality and appropriateness of their curricular offerings, top-down decisions by state officials that eschew faculty input and, at times, treat all institutions and disciplines alike, are particularly worrisome. One might ask whether there is a vacuum of faculty led curriculum governance that attracts such intrusions, or at least fails to repel them or turn them into more collaborative decision processes.

Finally, private and governmental foundations often support curriculum development efforts (Stark & Lattuca, 1997; Huber & Morreale, 2002). Indeed, academic administrators at some of the most elite and well endowed institutions claim that curricular innovations and major revisions are difficult for their institutions to afford without external funding (Smith & Briggs, 1999). Controversy arises, however, when granting agencies or individual donors offer significant incentives to develop curricula in specific content areas or using specific instructional processes (e.g., technology, service learning, field study). Such grants are particularly likely to draw fire when they are unsolicited and require institutional cost sharing. Oberlin College, for instance, recently accepted a grant to establish a faculty line to teach Korean history (personal correspondence). While student demand for the inclusion of Korean studies had been strong for several years, another program already had been promised the next available faculty billet. Many faculty members, regardless of their support for either program, were dismayed that an external donor could jump the line to insert its own priority ahead of one the institution itself had previously established. Obviously, the institution could have refused the donor's offer. Yet stories like this suggest that faculty may at times--particularly when budgets are tight--view curricular carrots to be just as intrusive as curricular sticks, and they may be uncertain how best to ensure adequate faculty input in such decisions.

Conclusion

Institutional size and complexity long have been recognized as forces that strain the ability of faculty to govern colleges and universities adequately. Environmental complexity only increases that challenge. The complexity and resulting professionalization of many facets of collegiate management leaves few areas of campus decision making for which faculty are

the preeminent experts. The chief remaining functions that most depend on faculty expertise are academic personnel decisions and the curriculum. In order to ensure that unique faculty expertise is appropriately and optimally exercised in curricular decisions, research is needed to increase understanding of the roles faculty can play in curriculum governance. Scholarship on higher education governance and curriculum will each be advanced by an exploration of curriculum governance models commonly used by today's colleges and universities. Curriculum governance itself will be advanced by an exploration of uncommonly good models when those models are understood as contributors to particular missions and the products of differing local contexts.

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