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Supplemental or Shadow Governance Structures?
The Promise and Peril of Task Forces During Times of Change

INTRODUCTION

Anyone who has championed change at a college or university understands that powerful dynamics sustain the status quo in these complex organizations. It has been observed that efforts to steer a college often meet with the same success as a driver steering “a car skidding on ice” (Cohen and March 1974). Indeed, our institutions of higher learning are, by design and inclination, organizations with diffuse power (Weick 1976). Of course, colleges and universities *do* change and the mechanism that allows individuals or groups to purposeful redirect an institution is the system of governance. As Henry Rosovsky (1991) puts it: “Governance concerns power: who is in charge; who makes decisions; who has a voice, and how loud is that voice?” (p. 261). The three most influential voices are generally acknowledged to be the board of trustees (or governing board), the administration, and the faculty (especially full-time faculty members). Though diverse views are held regarding the balance of power between each of these groups (e.g., AAUP1995; AGB 1998), a central tenet of “good” college or university governance is that *all* key constituencies ought to be able to influence institutional decision-making. That is, governance ought to be “shared.” The rationale for this is three-fold:

1. Colleges and universities have an established division of labor. Each group has distinct responsibilities, areas of expertise, and/or perspectives. Given these

disparate roles, different constituents may have greater insight into certain matters. (For example, the faculty are typically involved in curricular matters while the board and the administration may have more to say about fundraising or financing.) For larger institutional issues, shared governance requires all constituencies to participate in decision-making.

2. Institutions of higher learning are also academic communities (Sanders 1973; Shils 1992). As such, they have certain shared norms, values, and beliefs (that is, distinct organizational cultures) (Clark 1972; Chaffee and Tierney 1988; Tierney 1988). Broad based decision-making is less likely to produce ideas that run afoul of the prevailing institutional ethos, identity, or mission.
3. Broad consultation and participation also promotes consensus around a particular idea and builds a critical mass of supporters sufficient to bring about change. It is a strategy for generating a plurality of supporters from multiple constituents who will work to advance the idea and ensure its success.

These three ideas correspond to the tripartite model of academic governance described more than two decades ago by J. Victor Baldrige and associates (Baldrige, Curtis et al. 1977)—they are the bureaucratic, collegial, and the political models of governance. A great deal of recent work has built upon this typology, describing how elements from two or more of these models conspire to influence and hopefully improve decision-making (Childers 1981; Tierney 1987; Birnbaum 1988; Bensimon 1989). Special emphasis has been placed on the role of cultural or symbolic elements in institutional life as well

(Heath 1983; Chaffee and Tierney 1988; Kuh and Whitt 1988; Tierney 1988; Austin 1990).

Despite its well-touted benefits, shared governance has detractors. Critics charge that the traditional system of shared governance is slow, inefficient, and inadequate to meet the demands of our dynamic environment. Shared goals turn out to be a scarce commodity among any group of human beings, either inside or outside of the academy. Therefore, a clear consensus across multiple constituents on any large institutional initiative can be devilishly difficult to achieve. As Clark Kerr (1982) observes, colleges and universities often end up sticking with the status quo because it is the only option that *cannot* be vetoed. The problem is, that the most common alternative to shared governance is for innovations to be relegated to the departmental level, where individual faculty or staff members or small groups adapt in relative isolation: The curriculum committee has no idea what admission is doing. This produces incremental but uncoordinated change. Colleges and universities therefore come to resemble “academic holding companies” (Birnbaum 1988)—conglomerates of semi-autonomous units with a shared brand name. The diffusion of power stymies any one group attempting to unilaterally advance a broad-based initiative. The diffusion of attention (Hirschhorn and May 2000)—the multiplicity of interests that compete for the time and energy of various internal constituents—inhibit consensus building and slow change to a glacial pace.

The role of change task forces and committees

Over the past two decades, colleges and universities have experimented with new decision-making models, ones that exist parallel to or even independent of, the established committee structures typically associated with college and university governance. The strategic planning literature, for example, describes the use of task forces or committees to promote change (Baldrige 1983; Bryson 1995). Another example is the use of large decision-making committees. Corak (1992) in her study of such committees at thirty institutions concluded that they were useful strategies for change for three reasons:

1. They were a means of sparking collegial debate about academic issues that cut across schools or departments.
2. The committees were not distracted by day-to-day decision-making and could therefore focus on larger institutional issues.
3. They were a way to secure broad based political support for new initiatives.

A similar strategy has been undertaken by other institutions—the creation of change task forces or committees. In 1999, the Institute for Research on Higher Education (IRHE) at the University of Pennsylvania surveyed senior academic officers (Provost or Vice President for Academic Affairs) at 100 colleges and universities. Fifty-five responded that their institutions had recently created ad-hoc change committees dedicated to advancing a specific change agenda or spurring institutional renewal.

Despite their potential benefit, the literature is silent about whether such organizational structures, which exist outside of formal standing governance committees, constitute “good government.” Are they a more effective means of promoting change than traditional governance processes or do they constitute a kind of “shadow” government, the academic equivalent of the smoke filled room where the real deals are made before they are brought forth for consideration by the larger community? This paper describes how such a system was put into place at one liberal arts college and the implications of enacting that strategy.

METHODS

The following analysis is derived from data gathered for a larger qualitative inquiry into mission-centered change at three liberal arts colleges. The colleges in the study were selected through a purposive sampling strategy (Chein 1981) in order to develop “information rich cases” (Patton 1990). Interviews with representative from seven higher education associations¹ identified twenty-eight institutions that had undertaken significant change efforts during the past decade. To further narrow the field, I applied the following criteria:

- *The institutions were of similar type.* I reasoned that comparing institutions of vastly different size or purpose might complicate the cross-cases analysis.
- *Curricular reform accompanied the change effort:* Curricular reform often entails revisiting the educational purpose of the institution. The presence of broad-based

¹ American Association for Higher Education (AAHE); American Council on Education (ACE); Association of College Personnel Administrators (ACPA); Association of American Colleges and

curricular reform also indicated that the change process went beyond the rhetorical repackaging of existing programs.

- *Multiple constituents were involved in the change:* I was not interested in looking at innovations at the margins. I selected sites where the president, senior staff members, faculty from multiple departments or divisions, and staff members all participated in the change effort.
- *A similar timeframe:* I identified institutions that had engaged in interpretive change within the past decade or so, to ensure that many of the people who participated in those efforts were still on campus. I also disqualified several institutions where changes had been initiated recently.

The data presented here focuses on one institution, Olivet College, a small liberal arts institution of 900 students in rural southeast Michigan. To ensure that the interviews were “as representative as possible of the individuals, groups and situations under study” (Harrison, 1994, p. 68), I asked at several individuals to identify people with a range of perspectives on the change process—both proponents and opponents. I also supplemented that list with institutional leaders (e.g., president, senior staff members, president of the faculty senate.) I further attempted to avoid member bias by adding the names of several senior faculty members or long-standing administrators who had not been recommended to me. As new names emerged during interviews, I made an effort to subsequently schedule an appointment with that person, a variation of the snowballing or chain technique (Patton 1990; Bogdan and Bilken 1992). I visited the campus for a week

in November 1999. Thirty people from Olivet participated in this study. Our conversations lasted between 45 and 120 minutes, the average length of time being approximately one hour.

The interviews were semi-structured (Rubin and Rubin 1995) and the protocol solicited reflections on institutional life before, during, and after the institutional changes occurred. A separate protocol was devised for members who had joined the institution more recently (e.g., junior faculty members and students.) The protocol ensured I covered the intended topics during each interview. I used subsequent interviews to crosscheck facts. This “overlap method” (Lincoln and Guba 1985 p. 314) was an invaluable means of gaining multiple perspectives on key events.

Erikson (1986) notes that a primary type of “evidentiary inadequacy” is “inadequate variety in kinds of evidence” (p. 140). Institutional documents were an important additional source of data.² The documents corroborated many of the details provided by the participants in the interviews. They also allowed for comparison of institutional language before and after the change effort. Syllabi of new classes, descriptions of new programs, revised promotion and tenure guidelines, and the institutional budget were important artifacts that suggested the extent to which the change had been incorporated into the life of the institution.

Each interview was audio taped and transcribed. The transcripts, the institutional literature, and field notes constituted the data set. I performed “multiple readings of the

Independent Colleges (CIC); New England Resource Center for Higher Education (NERCHE).

² Examples include: Drafts of mission statements; Development materials; Course catalogs; Admissions materials; Minutes from faculty senate meetings; Accreditation reports; Various memoranda and reports regarding the change process.

entire set of field notes” (Erikson, 1986 p. 149), identified and coded emergent themes, and adjusted the coding rubric as the analysis moved forward and patterns emerged (Lincoln and Guba 1985; Rubin and Rubin 1995).

OLIVET COLLEGE CASE

The context for change

By the late 1980s Olivet was in trouble. Rapid and turbulent change was rocking American higher education and small liberal arts colleges were especially vulnerable (Chaffee 1984; Breneman 1994). The country was in the midst of a prolonged recession—escalating inflation coupled with rising unemployment (stagflation) had stalled the economy. Further, a demographic shift caused some to project that between 1979 and 1994 the total number of prospective students would decrease by fully twenty-five percent (Keller 1983 p. 12). Such external pressures weighed heavily on Olivet. A faculty member recalled: “We were in debt. We'd been in debt for a number of years, and hadn't balanced the budget, but then we were in *real* big debt.” An administrator described just how narrow the margin of error had been: “Folks who were here before I was used to talk about the ‘death in time’ principal of budgeting, where if a benefactor didn't die, you weren't going to make the budget.” Enrollments had declined from a peak in the 1970s of approximately 875 to 710 by 1991-1992. This was an institution ready to founder in a sea of red ink.

Even more troubling, Olivet ability to steer through these dark and turbulent waters had become seriously compromised. The board, the administration, and the

faculty had grown estranged from one another. A member of the senate remarked, “When there was work that the faculty was charged with—and I’ve been on the Senate since about that time—they would do things but it would inevitably end up on a shelf somewhere so the frustration and the cynicism was high.” Others described President Donald Morris as “aloof,” “hands off,” and even “autocratic.” (Indeed, a number recounted stories of faculty membersⁱ or administrators who had lost jobs for “crossing” the president.ⁱⁱ) The board was a distant entity and tenuously connected to institutional life. Infighting had also Balkanized the various academic departments. “The college had become very tribal. Feudal might even be a better way to characterize it and there are stories of people feeling that other faculty members were pirating students.” One chair noted: “There really wasn’t a very good system of checks and balances. If I wanted to create a new major, or if I wanted to eliminate something from the department, I could pretty much do it free-reign.” Thus, Olivet’s curriculum evolved into a nebulous collection of courses, bereft of any central idea that might lend some coherence.

On April 2, 1992, an ugly racial incident occurred during which fists and racial epithets were thrown. The event shocked the campus. Further, in the wake of the Rodney King beating, issues of race were front and center on the national stage. The eruption of racial hatred at a small, progressive, liberal arts college—the first by charter to admit women and Blacks—was a journalist’s dream, and a nightmare for President Morris. The next morning the media circus had come to town. A faculty member described the scene:

All the major networks were already here, and I got here a quarter to eight in the morning! So the big vans were set up, the big antennas were set up,

cables running everywhere and they were just going into classrooms and shoving microphones in people's faces. [...] This place was just savaged by the media.

A faculty member described the president's response:

He just opened the auditorium up and said, "Everybody get in the auditorium, we're going to talk about this." He let the press in to film what was going on and it just exploded! [...] Of course they showed this on television. And that's when Don Morris' world came crashing down real quick.

The humiliation and anger at the event animated the faculty. "We had a no-confidence vote for the president—86 percent of us voted ["no confidence"] and after graduation, the president resigned."

The consensus that emerged among many during the subsequent presidential search was that Olivet needed to embark on significant change effort. One board member wrote an influential advocating the hiring of a "mad scientist" who could "think outside the box." Dr. Michael Bassis seemed an ideal candidate. One professor remembered:

The thing that really pushed me towards Michael immediately was he was so honest about wanting a total change here. I remember him—what really stands out in my mind, and it puts it all in a nutshell, is he stood in the auditorium and he said "If you want incremental change, *don't hire me.*" This was during the search process!

Another faculty member concurred: "Bassis was clear during the search. He said 'I don't want to come here and just tweak this and fine-tune that.'" Bassis had served as Alan Guskin's Provost during the reformation of Antioch. Many hoped Bassis would bring some of the same creativity and entrepreneurial energy to Olivet.

The establishment of a parallel governance structure

Michael Bassis arrived in the summer of 1993 and his first task was drawing the community into a broad based change effort. Immediately, he began meeting with faculty and staff members, both formally and informally. He also organized a faculty retreat, which was held at the end of the summer. There he challenged the faculty. One senior administrator recalled the moment.

He said: "I want you to answer a basic question for me. Why should any student with a range of opportunities and options that students have nowadays, why should any student choose Olivet College?" And we talked about being a small caring community. "And that was the extent of the uniqueness and distinctiveness of Olivet College?" Michael said. "That's not good enough!" Well, you know, that made some people happy and others not very happy."

Indeed, Bassis quickly sensed that the apparent consensus for change expressed during the search represented the will of a passionate and vocal minority. One senior administrator member described the situation in the following way:

At the beginning, I saw three groups of people. Those who were the naysayers, those who were the fence sitters (which was the biggest group) and the vanguard. You know I think we had a good size to group of naysayers to begin with and a medium-size group of fence sitters and just a little tiny handful of vanguard.

A significant challenge to Bassis was that many of those ambivalent about change occupied positions of authority in the formal academic governing structure. One person, who was a faculty chair at the time, remarked:

Back earlier in the '90s there were a lot of people that had been here for years. They were in charge of the curriculum committee, faculty committees and as the new president came in and said we want to do things collaboratively. All of a sudden, a lot of the people who had been here for years were saying: "Why? Wasn't what we had good enough?"

Bassis seemingly was at an impasse. He could advance various change initiatives through the existing committees and risk having new ideas stalled on procedural grounds, debated to death, or rendered insipid. Or, with the full backing of the board, he could simply disregard the faculty governance system entirely and railroad his changes through.

Instead, Bassis found a third way. He began by treating the faculty as a committee of the whole. He called a meeting and charged the full faculty with establishing a change agenda. A senior faculty member noted,

He said, “I’m not going to tell you what this institution should be. That’s your job.” And of course there was a sense of “yeah, yeah, right, right—we’ve heard *that* before” but he said, “I’m just going to give you these parameters and you have to work within these parameters” and he laid them out. They were things like the college has to develop a new vision that’s in line with the heritage of the school [...] he wasn’t going to turn us over and let us become a truck driving institute or a military academy that only allowed women.

Another remarked: “To Michael’s credit, when he came here he said we had to change but he didn’t tell us *how* we had to change.”

Next, Bassis called for the formation of a new multi-constituent committee (elected by the full faculty) to chart an overall direction for the institution—the “vision commission.”

He said “I’m not going to tell you what to do but I’m going to appoint—I’m not going to appoint, you *elect* a committee to deal with what should our vision and our mission be. [...] It was a large committee made up primarily of faculty with some staff and administration. They met regularly and then members would go off and talk to assigned segments of the faculty and staff so that they could understand the dialogue and what was going on. Finally, they came up with the idea of Education for Individual and Social Responsibility.

The process resulted in the formulation of a specific educational vision that most (if not all) had participated in shaping and could subscribe to. That spring, it was brought before the full faculty for a vote where it passed overwhelmingly. A department chair remarked:

People accepted the vision because we all had been involved with the process—we'd met with our vision commissioner (or whatever they were called!) and there was a lot of dialogue. By the time it came out people just felt "this is what we've all been talking about." That's what I recollect.

Next, Bassis asked the faculty to begin devising a list of competencies—what would an "Education for Individual and Social Responsibility" look like? The faculty formed another working group. One member of that committee recalled: "We devised this list and what it turned out was every department, every program, every body wanted their content on the list!" A list was presented to Bassis with 24 outcomes. The committee member recalled his response: "This is crazy! Most schools do it with 8 or less!" So the committee finally pared down the list to sixteen."

Next, four working groups were established whose purpose was to formulate an overall strategy for achieving the vision. "You self-selected to be on a working group and those working groups brought their work back to the full faculty." The summer of 1994 the four plans were finalized and presented at a faculty retreat. A senior faculty member noted:

The plans were very, very different. One of the plans was called the block plan.³ There was another plan that was essentially it was just business as usual—it came from some science people. All they wanted to do was emphasize the sciences and add more science requirements. And then there was one from the business department that didn't have a lot of

³ It involved using block scheduling so that students take one intensive course at a time for three and a half weeks.

distinguishing features. The last one was to use portfolios to show what students had learned.

There was great debate but none of the plans was able to garner a majority of votes.

According to one observer: “Michael [Bassis] did favor the block plan but he never, never pushed his own agenda, he really tried to allow this to grow completely out of the faculty so that there was total ownership.”

On the final afternoon of the retreat, Bassis decided to act.

Saturday night there was a picnic at the president’s house [...] and he took all the principals that were involved plus a couple of other people and he said: “Come in my back room.” And it was bare knuckles backroom dialogue there.

The “Olivet Plan” that emerged consisted of a new core curriculum, extensive use of portfolios for student assessment, and a one-month “intensive learning term” at the end of each year during which students take one course, a concession to proponents of the block plan.

The full faculty then formed committees to advance particular elements of the Olivet Plan. Conveners were elected for each group and then participation in these committees was open to all and faculty and staff members who chose to participate selected the committees that most interested them.

I was on the working group that created the intensive learning term. We had a lot of a lot of input on what it could be and what it couldn’t be and why it would work for some disciplines and why it wouldn’t work for other disciplines and we had a lot of “I can’t possibly teach a course in 3 ½ weeks!” and, there were a lot of heated discussions on this—whether it should be in January, whether it should be in May, whether it should be part of spring semester or whether it should be something separate, whether it should be courses that were part of the regular ed curriculum or

whether it should be these really neat courses that would take us to far parts of the earth. Lots of discussion about it.

Another described his experience:

I actually convened the general education group and we had a general idea of what a course like Self and Community would be like—very general, what it's content would be, and then people who were going to teach in Self and Community got together that summer and really worked out the whole course in detail to the point where we had a full-fledged syllabus and readings and everything that we wanted. And then we brought that back to the faculty. So we were able to move along expeditiously and get this whole thing put in place.

As each group finished its work, it was brought before the full faculty for a vote.

The president of the faculty senate recalled:

In those meetings there were what I came to call the eight votes. There was always eight no votes. I remember the first one the president came out, he was just furious. "That should have been by acclamation! Why wasn't that 100%?" And I looked at him, "You don't want 100% votes." "Why not?" I said, "If it goes belly up you need at least one no vote so that everybody can say they voted no. Oh no, no." I said, "don't worry about it." So we developed the idea of critical mass. And that happens to be my political philosophy. I'm leery of acclamation. Unless it's some emeritus vote or something like that. And the next thing was the dean said well who voted no? I said you don't want to know. You'll destroy everything, building the trust. Each month there was one or two votes that came up on one of these elements and there were eight to ten no votes. So then they start looking for, they start profiling. Well, it's got to be this person. I said, "No, no." Because I knew who was voting how. "No, they voted for it." "They did?" "Yeah." I said, "What you got it about 80% consensus on this thing, 20% aren't sure or don't like it at all," I said. "You've got your critical mass."

Among the participants, the committee work generated considerable excitement.

A junior faculty member at the time remarked: "I assisted in the development of the curriculum of Self and Community so I had a very critical, very central involvement in that project. So I said—OK, they're very serious with this Olivet Plan business. It went

beyond rhetoric for me.” Another junior faculty member spoke of the excitement of shaping the curriculum: “I was real excited [...] I'm looking at this as—I'm ready commit my life here! This is something I really believe in!”

For others, the entire effort violated their conceptions of shared governance.

This is where the contention started to come in. Because it was violating the handbook. It wasn't going through the traditional channels of policy committee reviews it, policy gives it to senate to review, senate brings it to the full faculty for a vote.

One administrator who was very active in the change effort explained:

We had to short circuit that because we all knew that in the past things would get hung up over commas and semi-colons. Everything had to be worked out to the I dotted and the T crossed and it was just murder getting anything through the faculty that way. And we didn't have the time to do that. Plus, some of the things we were doing were really half-baked! They were there in concept but they were not there in detail. And, Michael knew that if we're going to wait for that it's never going to happen—this is the way great things get killed—it has to go through the whole bureaucracy and it dies. And that's where some faculty said this is a violation of handbook, we're not following the handbook, Michael is stomping on the handbook.

The slippery slope

Some felt that Bassis had been manipulative. “They called it ‘Michael-managing.’ Michael managing the place by getting involved in all sorts of committees and creating new task forces and everything like that.” Indeed Bassis did manipulate the process to a degree in order to avoid the governance structure.

We weren't voting to approve a program, we were voting to “endorse” a program—he changed the wording and then the people who were going to be teaching and delivering those programs would work out the details of those programs and eventually bring it back to the faculty.

And, there seemed to be good reasons to do so.

They had turned into roadblocks—they would actually lay down in front of the plan at times and say “tell you what, that aspect or that initiative of the plan has to get to the policy committee? I think I’ll run for policy chair and that will put an end to that!”

For those who refused to participate in the change effort, Bassis began to deliver a clear message. One faculty member put it this way:

He said, basically, we are moving forward with the Olivet Plan so you need to know that. It will be an uncomfortable place for you to work if you really dislike what we're doing. This may not be the fit. Their 3,000 other educational institutions in this country, one of them has to be a good fit for you.”

Ultimately, several faculty paid a price. One very active change proponent reflected:

Michael did say as we developed the vision and started to develop the plan: “No one will lose their jobs because of this plan.” But ultimately, people *did* lose their jobs because of the plan. They lost their jobs because they didn’t believe in what we were doing as an institution, and we did this collectively and collaboratively. They lost their jobs because they didn’t invest.

One junior faculty member at that time remarked:

There was a group of faculty that I think were viewed by the administration as not being team players. And I think there was a push to, in my opinion, to get rid of them, not to kind of bring them on board. I think a lot more could have been done to bring them on board. I think we lost some really good people, really good teachers.

This process of attempting to solidify gains intensified after Bassis left the presidency and an interim president took over. One administrator explained:

Occasionally we’d go down the faculty list and just start checking them off and say “Where do you think they stand on these things?” and we’d watch their behavior and pretty soon the checks started coming off the list. Then there was sort of the dozen people that were the naysayers and then there

were—two years ago there were six people. And of those six people, there's probably only one left, I think.

As it turns out, the data suggests that an overt attempt to manipulate the debate proved a singularly ineffective strategy.

Some faculty were opposed to the change. [...] Not necessarily to the Olivet Plan or the whole nature of it, but that there were parts of it or aspects of it. Or the way that it was being implemented or that it was going to fast. And they were outspoken about it. You know, I think most of us had some question about some part of it but weren't really speaking out about it. These were people who were not afraid, you know. It was interesting because as they left you could see other people rising up on the list.

During one particularly contentious debate, the interim administration tried to identify faculty opponents of a particular initiative.

[The Interim President] assumed it was the same seven people voting against him and he actually started playing this game and we got wind of it—who the seven people were that were voting. It was different people! There were probably two or three people that really were voting against everything. But like, I voted against two things. I voted against [one initiative] and I can't remember what the other thing was I voted against. And it was something that was just sort of a technicality but I didn't really like how it was coming across. And I voted for all the other things. But he decided who it was. And interestingly, I ended up on his list of seven. Yeah. I was definitely on shit list, to put it bluntly.

The faculty member went on to explain.

The problem with that is that it assumes this totally simplified model in which you have OK, like the seven people who always vote against every plan. Not sort of like realizing or not believing that it's different seven people every time. So you're trying to play this political game to sort of shore up essentially your idea, and yet, it just doesn't match what the reality of the situation is!

The administration also began actively selecting committee members.

The first faculty meeting of that year, first or second, the committee assignments came out. I was a convener and every convener is supposed to be on the general education committee. That was the point was you need the conveners to come together because they were the representatives of the different components. I was the only convener that was left off of the general education committee. The list comes out and every other convener is here and I'm the only one left off. Then all of these other committees you'd see the same names. It's like, this person is on this committee and this committee and this committee and this committee and this committee. Wait a minute. They're on five committees and I'm on none. Not that I'm dying for committee work but you want a range of voices. Not the same voices. But of course, that was what they wanted. They arranged these committees so that they would have agreement.

Ultimately, the lack of trust led to petty acts of subterfuge. Anonymous, nasty letters being slipped underneath the doors of administrators. Of greater import was that a group of faculty members began meeting to discuss ways of addressing their lack of trust in the administration. They were concerned that the Interim President would undo their work. One faculty member remarked: “The Olivet Plan was *our* Plan; we’ve been involved in this and we didn’t want to see someone destroy what had been built by everyone simply because they were upset that that they didn’t get selected [as the next president.]” In a strategy that mirrored the earlier toppling of Morris, they went to the board. An administrator who participated in those discussions recalled: “Eventually the faculty turned on [the Interim President and the Dean] who worked for him. We called and talked with some board members separately to get their advice.” The group ultimately decided to distribute a “ballot of no confidence”—to mail the ballots to faculty member’s homes and have them collected by the secretary of the faculty. Once these events came to light, other faculty members contacted the board to protest what had happened. In due course, the board determined that the vote was done improperly and

they ordered the ballots destroyed. Both sides described the end result as vindicating them. The Interim Dean remarked: “Five of them resigned when the plot failed. [...] [The Board] said that the whole process had been done outside of faculty rules.” On the other hand, the faculty members who organized the “ballot of no confidence” feel that the events drew the attention of the board and may have pressured the Interim President and Dean to leave.

ANALYSIS

The events at Olivet College raise important questions about the challenges of creating new forms of governance, the factors that contribute to procedural fairness, and the dividing line between good and bad governance.

The benefits of parallel governance structures

The gridlock that paralyzed Olivet early in the case called for unusual countermeasures. Bassis’s primary strategy for maneuvering around a recalcitrant “old guard” was the creation of a parallel governance structure. This proved to be an effective approach for a number of reasons:

- The parallel structure obliterated the isolation of various constituencies by placing administrators, faculty, and staff on committees together. The process helped mitigate the sense of “we/they” and promoted cross-fertilization of ideas between groups. The committees were therefore an effective form of lateral coordination (Bolman and Deal 1997)—a means of allowing distinct groups to communicate and work together towards a common cause.

- The creation of a new decision-making process signaled to the community that this was not “business as usual”—significant change was in the offing.
- The committees provided a safe environment (since they were populated by change proponents) for ideas to be refined before being introduced to the larger community. Committees brainstormed in seclusion and alternative ideas were explored and debated. This prepared the sponsors of particular policies before they brought them to the full faculty for a vote. Developing consensus within the committee also created a ready-made block of votes in support of an initiative.
- The committees were a means of building political support for the overall change agenda. They created multiple opportunities for involvement by individuals. Further, investing time and energy engendered a greater level of commitment among the participants (Kanter 1972). This dynamic was particularly evident among “fence sitters” who were initially ambivalent about change. Once they were enticed to participate, they began to support the change effort.
- Creating multiple committees also made it difficult for opponents of the change to derail the change effort. The naysayers—people adamantly opposed to change—were a relative minority and did not have the numbers or the time to participate in all the committees, even though membership was open. As Cohen and March (1974) observe, creating multiple “choice opportunities” can overload the system. In this case, this meant overwhelming those who opposed change with opportunities for involvement. There were simply too many fronts on which to fight the battle.
- Finally, the change task forces were unusual bureaucratic structures in that they had a finite lifespan. When a task was accomplished (e.g., a course was designed or policy

implemented), the group could disband and individuals could direct their energies on some subsequent task related to the change effort.

Establishing legitimacy

However, these prodigious benefits accrued to the institution only as long as institutional members viewed the process as legitimate and fair. This is consistent with the findings of previous researchers (Lind and Tyler 1988; Greenberg 1990; Brockner, Chen et al. 2000). But what factors contributed to a sense of “fairness?” At the beginning of the case, the legitimacy of the new governance structure was based on a mandate from the board of trustees for radical change and Bassis’s own clear intentions about promoting transformative action (“If you want incremental change, *don’t hire me.*”) Over time, however, its legitimacy derived from *how* the structure was put into practice and the behavior and norms that emerged from the new system. Certain principals (tacit or explicitly held) were at play. These included:

- Broad participation and wide consultation
- A free and unconstrained debate
- Tolerance of dissent
- Individual autonomy and a decentralization of control

These principals formed the foundational requisite for legitimate change—what the senate president referred to simply as “trust.” When these basic principals were violated, when groups attempted to manipulate the process, the institution reverted to isolated and antagonistic factions. Important distinctions can be drawn between Bassis’s tenure and that of the subsequent interim administration. However, the case also suggests that temptations to manipulate the process were ongoing.

Inclusion vs. exclusion

Although the parallel governance structure were a strategy for working around an entrenched “old guard, ” it did so by broadening participation. Though the faculty senate had procedural claims to oversight of the faculty agenda, President Bassis was able to avoid the charge of administrative meddling by handing the control over the agenda to the faculty as a whole. Further, the committees that were subsequently established were open to all interested individuals (faculty and staff.) In most cases, anyone could participate in shaping whatever aspect of the change agenda that he or she found of greatest interest. In those few instances where membership was limited (e.g., the “Vision Commission”), each constituency elected its own representative and the work of that group was widely circulated and input was actively solicited from non-participants.

The violation of this principal was most evident during the interim administration, when individual administrators sought to manipulate committee membership to achieve a desired end. (For example, when the faculty member was dropped from all committees after she had become a vocal opponent of some of the interim administration’s policies.)

Dealing with resistance

The legitimacy of any governing body is perhaps most apparent when it deals with dissenters. All significant change efforts prompt resistance (Schein 1985; Duck 2001): As Donald Schon (1971) notes, the more radical the perceived change, the greater the opposition is likely to be. There is a tremendous temptation to squash resisters. However, Bassis dealt with opponents early on by encouraging them to engage in open

debate about what was best for Olivet. He also targeted specific fence sitters and invited them into participate in the change process. Bassis was constantly reaching out. Once the Olivet Plan was adopted, he began to make it clear that outright resistance to the Plan was futile. That people should join the effort or find a better elsewhere. However, he relied on persuasion. The ultimate decision to engage or disengage rested with the individual.

The case does suggest that later in his tenure a few individuals may have been forced to resign or even fired. (Certainly after Bassis's departure there were faculty members forced out.) The interim administration also made overt attempts to manipulate the voting process by pressuring individual faculty members.

The locus of decision-making

Throughout the process Bassis pushed decision-making to the local level. He relied on others to formulate the Olivet Plan. ("I'm not going to tell you what this institution should be. That's your job.") He Bassis demonstrated uncommon faith in the overall process, a fact particularly evident when he allowed one of his pet ideas, the block schedule, to be set aside once it became clear that the majority opposed to it. Of course, this does not mean Bassis was not a vocal participant in the process. He was willing to challenge the faculty (e.g., asking them to create a unique vision for Olivet and making the committee pare down the number of competencies) and he also helped broker the compromise between the four rival plans.

The interim administration, by contrast, sought to manipulate the process to achieve its own desired ends by attempting to identify individuals who voted against various policies, manipulating committee membership, and pressuring suspected subversives.

In sum, a clear line can be drawn between those factors that promote shared governance and those that abrogate it. (See figure 1.)

Figure 1: Positive and negative factors influencing shared governance

Positive Factors	Negative Factors
Providing multiple opportunities for participation	Limiting access to influencing the process (e.g., not allowing people to serve on committees)
Transparency and openness	Attempting to control individuals with threats behind closed doors
Promoting debate, even at the cost of losing an argument (e.g., Block scheduling)	Manipulating the process or people to produce a desired outcome
A willingness to trust in the outcome of an inclusive process	Attempting to manipulate individuals to achieve a specific end
Drawing in naysayers	Isolating, threatening or punishing naysayers
Pushing decision-making down to the local level and accepting the will of the majority	Attempting to seek your own way (“I’m going to run for chair of a policy committee and put an end to that!”)

An final caveat

Justice Brandeis (1928) remarked: “The government is the potent, the omnipresent teacher. For good or for ill, it reaches the whole people by its example.” A lesson derived from this account is that noble intentions can be overwhelmed by expediency. In the innovative measures undertaken to rescue a foundering institution—the creation of a parallel governance structure—the seeds were sown that gave rise to a

kind of shadow government where individual factions attempted to manipulate events to achieve their own ends. To a degree, it was a reversion to the earlier governance gridlock—an absence of communication and coordination and of trust. While circumventing the existing system of governance freed the institution from existing procedures, it also enabled the institution to slide its way down a slippery slope. Playing fast and loose with the formal decision-making process (e.g., having the faculty “endorse” an idea rather than bringing it to a “vote” through formal channels) seemed an innocuous notion but set a new norm—a precedent that the violation of established procedures for the good of the “cause” was acceptable. The interim administration resorted to overtly manipulating the process and cowering individuals with threats. A group of faculty and staff members circumvented normal procedures by approaching individual board members without the knowledge of the administration and holding an unofficial “ballot” of no confidence. While there is a need for creative governance innovations, the potential pitfall is an unhinging of existing procedures, blacklisting, and witch hunting.

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ⁱ At Olivet, faculty "tenure" refers to a system of five-year contracts.

ⁱⁱ The AAUP censured Olivet for these firings.