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### Governance in Academic Institutions: Why is it Different and Difficult?

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## Governance in Academic Institutions: Why is it Different and Difficult?

When you deal with faculty you have to know that you are dealing with a different group of people. Managing faculty, and managing an academic institution, is different than managing employees in government, or in the private sector. This claim has been researched before, and some scholars have tried to come up with explanations for how governance in academic institutions is different than governance elsewhere. In 2017, Peter Maassen warned that reform agendas sometimes fail to understand how universities have “unique” historical and structural features, while in 2018, Anna Saiti is quoted making the point that: “Universities are not enterprises.” Figuring out how academics are different, and what works and does not work for them, is important for the effective management of any academic institution.

From my experience as a faculty member in both public and nonprofit universities for more than twenty years, I can definitely attest to that. Faculty members usually have inflated egos for one thing, and do not accept orders, or directives easily. They are used to being in control in their classes and lecture rooms, so reversing this role is not easy for them. They also are ‘people of letters’, highly educated, well read, thinkers and analysts. This is the nature of their vocation, so do not expect them to say yes easily to any change introduced by the administration. Additionally, it becomes more complicated with tenured faculty. The latter group has worked hard to earn tenure after long years of teaching, service and research and they are not expected to yield to directives from fellow colleagues occupying administrative positions on a temporary basis, or from anybody else for that matter.

Every now and then universities tend to try hiring practice professionals to pass on their experience to students, and occasionally they may be given administrative positions, as department chairs or deans. If they come from the private sector, or even from government, they tend to use the same management strategies and tactics as those used in the institutions they came from, but more often than not, this may not work. Examples of failed, unfitting strategies borrowed from other sectors besides academia, include imposing excessively bureaucratic measures as is the case in the government sector, or alternatively focusing too much on profit making and quantitative measures, if they are coming from the private sector.

Is there a magic formula that needs to be applied to academia? I do not think so. However, there are some common characteristics and principles unique to the academic world that all new entrants to that sector should be aware of. These include:

- *Creativity thrives on freedom* and if you want your faculty to excel in research and teaching, then give them space. Over interference in their affairs may have a negative impact on their creativity and innovation.
- *No one size fits all* so allow for flexibility and for different departments and disciplines differing in their internal governance structures and procedures, so long as they deliver the needed outcomes.
- *Participatory governance* where faculty have a real say in the decision making process within their universities is very important, but a balance has to be struck so that you do not overuse them by asking them to serve on numerous committees as sometimes happens, to the extent that this detracts from their research and teaching time.
- *Flatten the hierarchy* and do not assume that the President, Chancellor, Dean or Chair have the same authority and power as a top level government bureaucrat or a CEO in a business operation. Servant Leadership, where power is derived from serving others

and tending to their needs, may be more fitting in academia, than for example “Autocratic Leadership” styles.

- *Universities should not be incurring losses, but an over focus on profit making is a call to failure.* Education is a calling and a mission. If you are going to operate the university like a business, then in an extreme situation, you may end up offering your services to only those who can afford to pay, and miss recruiting qualified and bright students just because they lack the financial means. You may also in that extreme situation end up closing programs and majors based on the credit hours they generate, despite their contribution to knowledge creation, or more threateningly, getting rid of senior faculty because they are the most expensive and replacing them by less junior and accordingly oftentimes less expensive faculty.

To wrap up, a word of advice to the University administrators out there, you must realize that academics are a different animal and should be treated differently. A university is neither a business enterprise, nor is it a traditional government bureaucracy.