

Staff Get Little to No Say in Campus Governance. That Must Change.

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September 24, 2020

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By Lee Skallerup Bessette

When I first moved from being a contingent faculty member to a staff position in the faculty-development office, a few of my friends who were comfortably positioned in tenure-track jobs not-so-jokingly accused me of “becoming part of the problem” or “crossing over to the Dark Side” of academe. I was, in their eyes, emblematic of the dreaded administrative bloat that was taking over the university, siphoning money away from the classroom and into the pockets of largely useless (in their eyes) administrative offices.

Perhaps the only silver lining of Covid-19 is that at least some of those faculty friends have come to see the staff as essential to their ability to teach. But is that newfound respect temporary? Will it last beyond the pandemic? Most important, will it translate into a stronger voice for staff members in resolving the many issues facing the beleaguered world of higher education?

“Staff” is a nebulous term in academe. It can encompass janitorial and cafeteria workers, groundskeepers, administrative assistants, IT experts, academic advisers, student-services staffers, faculty developers, HR specialists, and more. We are the most highly diverse labor sector of any college or university, both in terms of what we do and who we are. Ask yourself: Where are you most likely to see women and people of color employed on your campus?

My job falls under a division loosely known as “academic staff” — that is, nonfaculty positions most directly related to student success (at least in the eyes of the institution). The designation is largely arbitrary and based (like most things in academe) on educational attainment and status. Some staff positions don’t require a B.A., while many members of the academic staff hold a master’s or — thanks to the dearth of tenure-track jobs — even a doctorate.

My goal in talking about “the staff” here is to be inclusive and all-encompassing. Some of us may be comforted by our academic-staff designation (so close but yet so far from faculty status), but we nonetheless share a common feature with every other staff member: We get almost no say in the governance of the institution.

We are there to implement whatever programs, policies, or initiatives the administrators come up with, developed with varying levels of input from the faculty. Professors have systems of shared governance and tenure protections that — however weakened in recent years — allow them to express some degree of opposition.

Staff sit in the uncomfortable space between the administration and the faculty, carrying out the edicts of the former while trying to appease the latter.

Staff are largely student-facing and engage with students at a different level than faculty members. Most of us don’t formally “teach,” but we mentor students, supervise them, assist them, support them, counsel them, serve them food, clean their classrooms, and plow their sidewalks in snowstorms. We know the students, and we know our own professional fields. We share that knowledge in a wide variety of ways — everything from professional conferences to journals to informal networks. We are a largely invisible parallel structure within the university, keeping the lights on and the infrastructure running, making sure that our students are given the best opportunities to succeed.

Why, then, in all of this recent (and needed) hand-wringing and speculating about the future of the university, post-pandemic, have we not heard many (if any) staff voices? Or for that matter, any calls for our voices to be included in any planning and restructuring?

For example, in a recent feature on “[The Future of the Academic Work Force](#),” *The Chronicle Review*’s editors offered a diverse mix of voices. Yet of the 18 people who shared their views, only two were staff members.

No one asked me for my view, but here is my answer just the same: I see a future in which “staff” are treated as peers, colleagues, and partners who provide different but vital insights and experiences, and are fully integrated into the decision-making process of the university.

As the pandemic has shown, staff members are truly integral to the success of our students and of our institutions. And I appreciate the gratitude that some professors and administrators have shown us for helping our campuses to get through the spring, prepare for the fall, and support whatever Covid plan was devised (often, again, without our input) and revised on the fly.

But I want that gratitude to translate into something more concrete moving forward. I would like to see a future in which staff members aren’t just reacting but are instead proactively given a voice. Ultimately, we deserve to be treated as an invaluable part of the larger community that academe represents.

Faculty members might be surprised to find out that staff members don’t always agree with the administration, either. In fact, some of us would be valuable allies in advocating for students. What if we rethought the ossified hierarchies that permeate academe — hierarchies that perpetuate the faculty-staff divide, not to mention perpetuating inequality, sexism, classism, and racism? What if shared governance actually included the majority of the people working at an institution? Instead of seeing a larger role for staff as a further erosion of faculty power, could professors embrace the opportunity?

Covid-19 has laid bare the limits of disciplinary knowledge and specialization when it comes to teaching the whole student and student success. And that is OK.

Faculty members are the experts in their disciplines, but they do not have a monopoly of knowledge around pedagogy, programming, student success, inclusivity, equity, accessibility, among other things. We shouldn’t expect already overtaxed faculty members to be experts in everything and anything. In fact, the intense pressure that many of them are feeling lately is largely because of structures and traditions that discourage professors from collaborating with staff members who *are* experts in those areas.

Academe is structured to discourage faculty-staff collaborations — and even to discourage collaborations between different units of staff members. I could cite many examples, but here is a key one: On most campuses, there are no rewards for faculty-staff collaborations on either side.

But academe doesn’t just need more collaboration. It needs an overhaul of the entire governance system. We need permanent structures — not more ad-hoc committees — that meaningfully integrate representatives from across the campus to propose solutions to an array of campus challenges.

We, as staff, are not “part of the problem.” If anything, given the chance, we can be a powerful part of the solution. With college campuses selling themselves as an entire “experience,” not just a set of courses, it’s high time for those of us responsible for that campus experience to be included in the larger conversation. The future of our institutions depends on it.

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