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Revitalizing Your Library Faculty Governance: Five Tips to Increase Involvement

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Introduction

If you're an academic librarian with faculty status, you know that this status comes with an equal portion of benefit and burden. Some of the benefits are academic freedom, support for scholarship, and elevated status on campus (though not necessarily higher pay). Some library faculty are even eligible for tenure (though we are not). On the flipside of these benefits are a few things I would consider burdens, such as tedious annual reviews and extensive service requirements. Library faculty governance, I would argue, falls somewhere in between a benefit and a burden.

Library faculty governance is a form of shared governance allowing library faculty to assemble, discuss pertinent issues, and communicate recommendations or complaints to library and university administration. Shared faculty governance has several layers, starting at the university department level, such as our library faculty governance, then moving up to the university's Faculty Senate, where every department has a representative. Shared faculty governance extends even beyond the university level to organizations such as the American Association of University Professors (AAUP), which has local chapters with representatives for each university. According to a 2009 column in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, shared

governance is “a delicate balance between faculty and staff participation in planning and decision-making processes, on the one hand, and administrative accountability on the other.”¹ In my experience, library faculty governance is the perfect avenue to discuss significant topics affecting our work, such as the process of evaluating librarian scholarship, the implementation of new university policies, or a decision by library administration. While all actual authority comes from library and university administration, library faculty governance is our voice in the decision-making process.

Background

While the aims of shared governance are commendable, anyone who has actually attended a meeting of library faculty governance may agree when I say that this benefit is equal parts burden. I vividly recall my first Library Faculty Assembly meeting as a new librarian at Kennesaw State University in 2016. I remember the meeting especially because once before, when I was still a paraprofessional at this same organization, I accidentally walked into a Library Faculty Assembly meeting. As I did, a hush came over the room, as if I had violated some sanctum reserved for those who had completed their MLIS and crossed into the realm of the professional librarian. No one kicked me out, but I was so overcome with the weight of my transgression that I exited as quickly as possible.

Once I attained my MLIS and my first professional librarian position, I thought that -- at last! -- I had my golden ticket to the Library Faculty Assembly. Unfortunately, my first official meeting was dull beyond reckoning. For 40 mind-numbing minutes, we followed Robert’s Rules of Order to establish a quorum (with a complicated system of proxies for librarians who could not attend the meeting in person), discussed the alteration of less than five words in one of our faculty bylaws, and heard reports from multiple committees with unpronounceable acronyms.

Finally, we received a litany of announcements from our library administrators. The meeting could not even end until someone had proposed the idea, someone else had seconded it, and we all grumbled out a chorus of “ayes”. The only things missing were a few powdered wigs and a gavel.

Through a series of unexpected events, I became Chair of our Library Faculty Assembly for the 2018-2019 year. While I can't claim to have done all the work myself, the Vice-Chair and I have significantly altered the format of our meetings, structure of our work, and the overall amount of faculty participation -- not by finding a magic loophole in one of our many bylaws, but by making it easier for faculty to engage. In this article, I will outline the five steps I found most helpful for revitalizing our library faculty governance: 1. Get Them in the Door, 2. Tell Them What It Is, 3. Give Them A Voice, 4. Give Them Something to Do, and 5. Keep Them in the Loop.

Get Them in the Door

The first hurdle to faculty participation is getting people to show up. At a large organization like ours, we have over 30 library faculty spread across three different worksites. While our faculty may be able to spare an hour for an important meeting, they often can't justify leaving their desk for up to two hours of travel time for one event. Our organization has slowly been turning to a culture of virtual and hybrid meetings. Converting to a hybrid meeting can be a challenge for speakers who are not used to creating virtual handouts or in-person attendees who are not used to the constraints of sharing a microphone. It can be helpful to assign one person to pass the microphone and one person to man the presenter computer, share virtual handouts, and answer questions in chat. While it can sometimes slow debate by forcing speakers to wait their turn for the microphone, it also ensures no one interrupts anyone else and that responses are

more thoughtful by virtue of having been planned in advance. Virtual meetings also allow for recording, which means faculty out sick can still be kept in the loop.

In keeping with this commitment to making it easy to participate, we also checked our bylaws to make sure they allowed for electronic voting (they did!) and switched all major voting to an electronic ballot. The added benefit to electronic ballots is that faculty have the ability to carefully consider their options before voting, rather than just echoing their neighbor's "aye" when they have no idea what they're actually voting on.

Tell Them What It Is

Once your faculty show up for a meeting, don't expect them to participate until they understand what the meeting is for! At the suggestion of our Faculty Senate representative (and partially for my own education), we invited the Chair of our university's American Association of University Professors (AAUP) chapter to give a presentation on shared faculty governance at our first Assembly meeting of the fall semester. We learned the purpose and value of shared faculty governance as well as some of the norms established by faculty governance in other academic departments at our university. Once library faculty had a broader understanding of shared governance, we broke down the organizational structure of our own Library Faculty Assembly and explained the various committees – sans the bewildering acronyms (the "FNEC" committee comes to mind). We received lots of positive feedback about this presentation and hope to make it part of every library faculty's orientation.

Give Them a Voice

As evidenced by my first meeting of library faculty governance, the format of our Assembly meetings did not afford much opportunity for faculty discussion. As a result, faculty were often disengaged from issues affecting them or even reluctant to bring up issues of concern.

For my first Assembly meeting as Chair, I was eager to find a way to incorporate more conversation into the meeting's format.

Our Vice-Chair and I learned that our university faculty handbook allows for “executive sessions”, portions of faculty governance meetings in which administration is asked to leave the room for confidential discussion among faculty. While asking library administration for this was awkward at first, it turned out they fully supported the practice. For our first executive session, we concluded the usual business portion of the meeting, asked library administration to leave, and stopped recording. Even after several assurances that this session was confidential, there were a few minutes of awkward silence. Finally, I began asking for opinions regarding recent administrative issues I knew had been bothering library faculty. Then, the floodgates opened. As a result of positive feedback from faculty, thirty minutes of executive session is now included at the end of every Library Faculty Assembly meeting and I ask faculty members to privately suggest topics to me for addition to the unofficial agenda. While we don't keep official notes on this portion of our meetings, I do keep a private list of general topics. At least one issue was raised enough times that I asked faculty for permission to bring this concern to library administration. The result was a new task force on how travel funds are allocated – which brings me to my next suggestion.

Give Them Something to Do

While our faculty governance has several formal committees, we found their rigid structure to be incompatible with handling unforeseen projects assigned by library administration or with ideas that arose spontaneously from faculty discussion. At the beginning of my term, such ad hoc projects usually fell to myself and the Vice-Chair to complete on our own. For example, the Vice-Chair and I once spent upwards of eight hours redesigning our template for

Faculty Performance Agreements. After a few months of that, we came up with the alternative of forming task force groups. When Academic Affairs requested all colleges draft new faculty workload guidelines, we formed a task force of library faculty to create the first draft. This draft was later presented to the entire Assembly for discussion and a successful vote of approval. Another example was a task force on professional travel requests, which formed after several faculty members raised concerns about the issue in an executive session. This spring, another task force updated our promotions guideline. Spreading the work out amongst smaller, temporary groups not only alleviates the workload for faculty governance leaders, but gives faculty a chance to become involved in their own governance without the obligation of joining a standing committee, which has limits on eligibility and number of participants.

Tell Them What's Going On

Finally, one of the easiest ways to keep faculty involved in governance is to keep them informed. In our case, this most easily took the form of a regular email update on the progress of projects, bylaw votes, or updates from library administration. Alternatively, you could begin regular meetings by discussing any developments on old business and past issues. It's important to note that no news is still news – if university administration hasn't approved a bylaw vote yet or if a task force is still working on the first draft of a project, it's still worth mentioning to faculty so that they know you're continuing to monitor the issue.

Conclusion

Shared governance is an important right for library faculty and participation is crucial to its success. While library faculty governance can at times be tedious, it doesn't have to be boring. By making a few simple changes, you can encourage your faculty to follow important issues, speak up about their concerns, and pitch in when work is needed. Once the precedent for

active participation is set, it will be a lot harder for library faculty governance to slide back into stagnation.

¹ Gary A. Olsen, "Exactly What Is 'Shared Governance'?" *The Chronicle of Higher Education* 55 (2009): A33-A35. <https://www.chronicle.com/article/Exactly-What-Is-Shared/47065> (accessed October 17, 2009).