

MEMORANDUM

To: John Savage, Bill Beeman, Luiz Valente, Paul Armstrong, Nancy Dunbar, Brian Casey, Peder Estrup, Mary Fennell, Laura Freid, Cynthia Frost, Michael Goldberger, Walter Hunter, Jim Husson, Beverly Ledbetter, Katherine Lewis, Ron Margolin, Donald Marsh, Janina Montero, Ellen O'Connor, Lisa Raiola, Donald Reaves, Bill Simmons, Merrily Taylor & Tom Dean

From: Russell C. Carey

Re: Short History of Governance at Brown University

Date: August 1, 2001

In preparation for the Executive Committee Retreat and the scheduled conversation about governance, President Simmons requested that I compile a short history of the evolution of governance at Brown. This memorandum is intended to provide you with a summary overview of the major reviews and changes which have taken place over the past thirty years. It is not a comprehensive history, and you will see that the focus is primarily on faculty governance, but it does give a sense of the recurring nature of the challenges and issues which the institution has confronted in this area.

Prior to 1969, the faculty governance structure consisted of a variety of committees and a monthly faculty meeting. There was no faculty senate or central steering committee coordinating the activities of the faculty prior to that time. In the late 1960s a combination of general campus unrest, monumental changes in the curriculum, student dissatisfaction with the quality of their participation in University governance, and faculty concerns about the senior administration made sustaining that structure untenable. The faculty appointed a committee (the Committee of January 7th) to investigate the role of the faculty in the making of University policy. A report was issued and two new committees were created: the Faculty Policy Group (FPG, predecessor to today's FEC) and the Educational Policy Committee (EPC, predecessor to today's CCC). Two years later a second committee (the Ad Hoc Committee on Student Participation in University Affairs) was formed and their work ended with the creation of the Advisory Committee on University Planning. Those three major committees still exist today, with some changes in charge and membership, and serve as key places for faculty (and student) participation in governance. There are, of course, a multitude of other committees on any number of topics¹ but these are the big three in terms of scope and

¹ There are currently 45 standing committees which, when fully staffed, require 230 faculty members.

responsibility². And, these committees have been the main focus of the various governance reviews and studies which have taken place over the past thirty years.

The theme that immediately becomes apparent from even a cursory reading of these reports is the consistency of concerns. The following excerpt from the 1971 Report could easily be written today:

After listening to analyses of the problems within the University we feel that much of the present criticism and dissatisfaction is related not to specific policy decisions but rather to the processes by which such decisions are arrived at and the manner in which they are presented. Even when there is disagreement on substantive issues, unnecessarily bitter division results from a lack of information and poor communication. It is not only the decisions themselves that matter; the ways in which they are made and received are no less important.

The committee writing that report noted that the FPG had been created to help solve the communication problem, but that it had “not been entirely successful in this regard.” An alternative was proposed – a University council consisting of representatives of all Brown constituencies (administration, alumni, Corporation, faculty, students). It was copied from the Princeton model and met with some initial enthusiasm, but eventually failed. ACUP was created instead.

Since the early 1970s any changes have largely been around the margins. President Swearer formed a Presidential Advisory Group (PAG), much like the previously proposed University Council. It met a few times but eventually lost momentum³. Reports and reviews in the late 1970s and throughout the 1980s focused on issues of communication, feedback, and structures that would improve confidence in the decision-making process and some revisions were implemented (such as adding the Past Chair of the FEC to the membership of the Academic Council) but no significant, University-wide changes were enacted. With the exception of portions of the 1997 Strategic Planning Task Force Reports,⁴ no studies of governance were conducted in the 1990s. However, the underlying concerns which prompted the 1971 Committee to write: “It is time we faced the growing distrust within the University and asked what can be done to restore our confidence in Brown and in each other” remain a part of the institutional fabric in 2001. Among these concerns are the following:

- Community members complain that governance and decision-making processes are too confusing, complex, and unwieldy. They do not understand who has responsibility for what decisions and the processes appear arbitrary.
- Significant misunderstandings about appropriate roles in University governance plague decision-making. Corporation committees vary in quality and operations – some are too hands-off and others are engaged at a managerial level. Students and faculty routinely desire to circumvent the administration and go directly to the Corporation, and the boundaries of authority and responsibility become blurred.

² ConFraT is another major faculty committee which I have left to the side for the purposes of this report. Its evolution over the past thirty years is complicated by the Lamphere Consent Decree.

³ President Gee formed a President’s Council in 1998 that was very similar to PAG. It also met a few times and then ceased.

⁴ The Task Force on Academic Resources & Organization proposed three models of reorganizing the academic administration.

- Decision-making is perceived as not consistently transparent nor collegial and, as a result, support for decisions which are made is not wide-spread.
- Frustration with perceived inadequacies of current structures leads to formation of ad-hoc committees and task forces, which can result in inefficiencies and duplication of efforts (see especially the numerous committees focused on technology). The number of committees generally stretches administrative and staff support – which is vital for good communication and information – beyond capacity.
- Faculty, and to a certain extent students, can not recruit enough members to serve on standing committees or take an interest in governance because it is not an activity which is highly valued and committee service is seen as a waste of precious time.
- Concerns of administration conspiracies and secret plans abound, causing ill will between the faculty and the administration.

The obvious question is what can be done about it that has not already been studied, discussed, and either implemented or discarded? Answers are not readily discernible, but are necessary. The purpose of the governance review is to force a focused discussion of governance in the campus community. What kind of democratic institution does Brown University want to be? What representative structures will address and resolve the concerns listed above and over the past thirty years in a meaningful and consistently satisfactory manner? How can the Corporation, administration, faculty, and students delineate their roles and understand (and accept) the boundaries of their authority and responsibility? Ultimately, what can be done to the governance of Brown University that will result in an organization which is efficient, transparent, collaborative, and progressive?

cc: Ruth J. Simmons
David Greene