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# VOICES CARRY:
# THE PERCEPTIONS AND IMPLICATIONS OF THE FACULTY CLIMATE RELATIONSHIP

**ABSTRACT:** Over the last 20 years the length of tenure of those who serve as presidents of universities has diminished. Most higher education administrators serve in their positions less than 6 years and this frequent turnover rate affects those in secondary leadership roles significantly. With each new president and provost, trust must be established. This study is important because it seeks to understand the elements that ensure a healthy faculty relationship with administrators. A qualitative case study method will be utilized to interview 5 faculty members within one college within a university in the Northwest region of the United States. The question that will shape this study is: What are the things that build trust between faculty and administrators that create a healthy mutually respective academic environment? It is the goal of this project to identify the elements of a positive faculty climate. The study results will be helpful to administrators and faculty who have an interest in faculty-administrator relations.

Most higher education administrators serve in their positions less than 6 years. Over the last 20 years, the length of tenure of those who serve as presidents of universities has diminished. With each new president and provost, trust must be established. This study is important because it seeks to understand the elements that ensure a healthy faculty relationship with administrators. A qualitative case study method will be applied to interview five faculty within one college within a university in the Northwest region of the United States. The question that will shape this study will focus on building trust between faculty members and administrators to create a healthy academic environment. Subsequently, it is the goal of this project to identify the elements of a positive faculty climate. The study results will be helpful to administrators and faculty who have an interest in faculty-administrator relations.

## Purpose and Question

For many years the debate over how to manage higher education has been in two camps. The first camp argues that it should be run by educators who understand the business of teaching and learning. These skilled professionals have dedicated their lives to understanding how to create the best possible environment for the acquisition of knowledge within their field of expertise.

The second camp would like to see education managed with a corporate business model. They believe the errors in managing education could be corrected with a more critical eye on the bottom line and that decisions should be made with the head and not the heart. The supporters of this approach to managing education usually consist of legislators, businessmen, and management specialists. A positive approach to build trust between these two camps is needed to improve communication and nurture a shared respect among all parties involved.

A qualitative phenomenology research approach will be utilized to interview five faculty within one college within a university in the Northwest region of the United States. The question that shaped this study is: What are the things that build trust between faculty and administrators that create a healthy, mutually respective academic environment?

It is the goal of this project to identify the elements of a positive faculty climate. The study results will be helpful to administrators and faculty who have an interest in faculty-administrator relations.

## Literature Review

In 1971, McConnell and Mortimer conducted intensive case studies involving one large state college and two large state universities to discover the degree to which faculty participation involvement with governance was held. Faculty oligarchies were the main focus, as well as limitations on faculty and institutional decision making, decentralization decision making, and administrative leadership and style (McConnell, 1971).

The conclusion to this study recommended the following for managing conflict and controversy in university governance:

> First, constructive adjustment to conflict is more likely if the system of governance incorporates effective methods of consultation, negotiation, and exploration of alternatives. Second, controversial issues should not be papered over; instead they should be made the subject of open debate. Third, if conflicts are allowed to become cumulative, peaceful resolution may become increasingly difficult…One of the unfortunate consequences of continuing conflict is that some of the protagonists may become so personally and emotionally involved as to resort to invective. This also had occurred at Fresno, and it was sufficiently disruptive as to lead to the investigators to suggest that the extremists who had resorted to personal abuse should retire from the conflict. Civility is essential to responsible government. Fourth, it is imperative that all concerned—administrators, faculty members, and students—should be committed to orderly change…Fifth, if the rulers resist orderly change, they will invite coercion. (McConnell, 1971).

The researchers encouraged those invested in university governance to remember that most universities are not there just to serve the faculty and students. Additionally, there are numerous facets to running a university and numerous stakeholders to placate.

Recent research has revealed updated desired roles and features of faculty governance. Research conducted by Miller, McCormack, and Pope, (2000) revealed a strong support by faculty to improve communication and trust between faculty and administration. This desired improvement would lead to improved motivation and performance from faculty and staff, thus having a positive impact on the institution. The clarification of terms among the parties involved would be a first step in moving toward mutual respect and help to open the lines of communication through a mutual understanding of the expectations at hand. Understanding governance for a specific institution is essential to the process.

Governance will vary from institution to institution. In general, however, governance refers to an instrument for institutions to make decisions about policy. Some institutions tend to rely on faculty-exclusive senates — for example, research universities, liberal arts colleges, and large regional doctoral institutions (Kezar & Sam, 2014). Shared leadership can vary from institution to institution.

Identifying a need for shared leadership and a strong support from faculty to improve communication and trust leads to the next step of identifying what is shared leadership. Shared governance can be challenging to implement even if the desire is there.

The Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges has called for "integral leadership" form leaders of colleges and universities…A publication called Top 10 Strategic Issues for Boards, 2013-2014, AGB provided this compelling definition of integral leadership:

> To accomplish these goals, many governing boards have moved to a model of integral leadership-collaborative by decisive leadership that can energize the vital partnership between boards and presidents. Integral leadership links the president, faculty, and board in a well-functioning partnership purposefully devoted to a well-defined, broadly affirmed institutional vision. (Bahls, 2014).

Defining what shared government is can be helpful in bringing a universal definition to a desired goal. Shared government has two concepts: One, giving various groups of people a share in key decision-making processes and two, allowing certain groups to exercise primary responsibility for specific areas of decision making (Olson, 2009). Olson, in Exactly What Is 'Shared Governance'? maintains, "True shared governance attempts to balance maximum participation in decision making with clear accountability" (Olson, 2009).

Recently the practice of shared government has come under criticism. Shared Governance in Colleges and Universities states, "There is a feeling among political leaders, board of governors (regents or trustees) and top administrators (chancellors, presidents and the like) that any sharing of authority impedes their 'right' to make the big decisions. They believe they know what is best and that faculty and staff should step aside and let the managers take charge(American Federation of Teachers-Higher Education, n.d., p.3)." This feeling reverts back more than 50 years to the bureaucracy referred to by Clark Kerr in which faculty and support staff were not considered valuable contributors to the governance of a given institution ( McConnell, 1971).

Nevertheless, practice guidelines to clearly synthesize shared government need to be implemented if the effort can truly produce positive results. Five "best practices" have been identified by Bahls (2014) as a system wide effort to improve shared government among all varieties of institutions.

1. Actively engage board members, administrators, and faculty leaders in a serious discussion of what shared government is (and isn't).
2. Periodically assess the state of shared governance and develop an action plan to improve it.
3. Expressly support strong faculty governance of the academic program.
4. Maintain a steadfast commitment to three-way transparency and frequent communication.
5. Develop deliberate ways to increase social capital between board members of the faculty. (Bahls, 2014, p. 3).

**Theoretical Framework**

The research conducted was focused on faculty climate and the relationship between faculty and administration. Individual interviews were conducted with the faculty from the same university college within the department to better understand how shared governance works within their particular institution. This ethnographic research relies heavily on the perception of the participants interviewed. Major themes taken from the participant interviews were identified and compared to two theories. The social contact theory and the professionalization theory are the two underlying theories that are applicable to the results of this study.

The social contact theory and the professionalization theory are the two underlying theories from which this study is derived. Williams (1947) maintained, in the well-established social contact theory, that increased contact between social groups will reduce prejudicial attitudes and behaviors (Kezar & Sam, 2014). Prejudices and misunderstandings can develop if faculty and administration do not have opportunities to interact with one another. For example, a Baldwin and Chronister study (2001) indicated that many tenured faculty have negative stereotypes about contingent faculty based on lack of direct contact .

The professionalization theory submits, as stated by Sullivan (2004), that the work of professionals is unique from other fields, so they operate under different principals and standards from workers or laborers. Sullivan (2004) goes on to assert: professionals organize and, to a large measure, manage themselves. Professional groups seek autonomy to create their working conditions because they believe that they can best establish the working conditions that will further their complex jobs and fulfill their commitment to the public good (Kezar & Sam, 2014). Faculty climate within a university department concerning shared governance would be influenced by both the social contact theory and the professionalization theory.

**Research Design & Methods** A qualitative ethnographic research method was utilized to interview five faculty within one college within a university in the Northwest region of the United States. The question that will shape this study is: What are the things that build trust between faculty and administrators that create a healthy, mutually respective academic environment? It is the goal of this project to identify the elements of a positive faculty climate. The study results will be helpful to administrators and faculty who have an interest in faculty-administrator relations.

The interviews were conducted over the phone and recorded for documentation purposes among faculty in the business and economics department of the university. Faculty were chosen at random with the first five responding to the researcher's request. The questions were centered on faculty climate and the relationship between faculty and administration.

**Participants**

All participants were instructors, associate professors, assistant professors or professors from the participating university. Table one, a demographic summary, identifies each participants gender, role, rank, and years at the university. The interview dialogue was recorded for analysis purposes. Common themes were identified based on the interview data.

Each participant had a unique insight into the role of administration. The topic of the questions were of great interest to each participant and their passion for the research focus and their role as a faculty member were evident in their responses to the questions. The majority of those interviewed have been with the university for over four years but appear to continually be looking for an avenue to a better work environment and shared governance with the administration.

Table 1.

| Name | Gender | Discipline | Academic Rank | 4+ Years at Institution |
|------|--------|------------|---------------|-------------------------|
| A | Female | Business and Economics | Faculty/Instructor | Yes |
| B | Male | Business and Economics | Professor | Yes |
| C | Male | Business and Economics | Associate Professor | Yes |
| D | Female | Business and Economics | Assistant Professor | No |
| E | Male | Business and Economics | Faculty/Instructor | Yes |

**Limitations**

The study was conducted on a small sample of faculty from one college within the university. Five faculty members out of 38 were interviewed. The results of this study represent a small percentage of the college faculty. If more faculty were interviewed different themes could arise that were not indicated in this study. Also, four out of the five participants have been employed by the university for over four years. This may influence their opinion because they have been employed under more than one university president and staff.

**Results**

As a reminder, the research questions were as follows: (1) Do you believe that trust is an important aspect in the relationship between faculty and administration and why? (2) What are things that can build trust between faculty and administrators? (3) What are the things that help retain faculty outside of salaries? (4) Describe your ideal workplace and institutional fit? (5) Is there something that I didn't ask that I should have asked? In some cases, follow-up questions were asked to clarify the answers of the participants. The interviews were organized by major themes that were present within the participant's responses. Some themes are identified even though they were only mentioned by one participant if the theme was strong throughout the participant's interview. The major themes and frequency of occurrence by participant is identified as build relationships, trust/transparency, underfunded, understaffed, autonomy, high turnover, communication, shared objective, and acknowledgment/ value. The most frequent themes mentioned were building relationships, autonomy, and having a shared objective.

**Building Relationships:** Building relationships was mentioned 3 out of the 5 participants as a way administration could improve the work environment. Sentiments mentioned by the participants were aligned with a desire to have a more developed relationship with the administration.

Participant C shareda desire for the administration to talk to the faculty instead of talking at the faculty "Not only make presentations, but to talk individually to faculty" (Participant C). A similar sentiment was expressed with Participant A of which an example is given of administration scheduling meetings with the faculty on the top of the hour but the faculty are still teaching courses at the top of the hour so those teaching classes could not attend or were

going to be late. This example shows a dissonance between administration and faculty in that a meeting with a group of people should be scheduled when the group is most likely available to attend.

A desire for trust and transparency were revealed through the interview process, "Maybe if they got to know each other better that would improve relationships. Any type of open discussions about what each other's motives are and what they are trying to achieve then they could understand each other's point of view and just daily interactions and projects or any type of procedures or processes that affect those parties," Participant D. A clear and open agenda where both sides are free to discuss their concerns would improve upon the established relationship, according to Participant D.

Participant E disclosed the most personal expression in the study in which a desire to get to know faculty families along with the faculty itself with the hope that the decisions made by administration would take into consideration not only the faculty members but their families, as well:

> Building a sense of community in the college. It takes more than a number on the screen but to know the person in-depth, you know their family, their interests as a relationship is built. There is a little more behind the decisions that they are making…based on the people you care about or the people you have established relationships with. (Participant E)

**Autonomy:** As the professionalism theory submits, as stated by Sullivan (2004) the work of professionals is unique from other fields, so they do not fall under traditional worker or laborer standards. Professionals seek autonomy to create their working conditions because they believe they are the most qualified to create the ideal working condition to accomplish their unique jobs and fulfill their commitment to the public good ( Kezar & Sam, 2014).  Another theme mentioned by the majority of the participants interviewed was autonomy. Having freedom for creativity to freedom to be trusted to accomplish their daily tasks.

The theme of autonomy in the terms of freedom was expressed as a way to motivate faculty in their current positions. "I like to do things on my own," Participant C. Others mentioned independence and the open environment in which to work. "…my ideal workplace is somewhere where I have a lot of independence," Participant D. Participant D showed the importance of autonomy for newer faculty members, as well.

Not all faculty interviewed focused on what they hoped to have in a workplace. Interview E spoke of what was already in place and how he appreciated this aspect of his job. "…they (administration) are open to new ideas (from faculty)" (Participant E).

**Shared Objective:** A shared objective was a popular theme. Also known as goal setting, shared objective has been a recommended to administration for over thirty decades. In the McConnell (1971) study this was emphasized as a clear advantage to administration who practiced this approach.  They go on to say that the elements of educational planning should be directed toward creating greater understanding and acceptance of the controlling goals of the institution. Additionally, McConnell (1971) points out, the discussion of decentralization in organizations in which it states that decentralization requires a preparatory period of orientation and training in which leadership has the opportunity to impact deeply the ideas that guide decision making at lower levels.

This is supported by the social contact theory which asserts that increased contact between social groups will reduce prejudicial attitudes and behaviors ( Kezar & Sam, 2014). The participants mentioned common goals to comments for improvement all in an effort to work within a shared objective. "To me I like to feel like I can make some sort of contribution to some sort of shared objective and that my contribution is acknowledged and valued and because it is an academic setting I still have the time, resources, and energy to do the research I want to do and participate in the things I want to participate on campus," Participant B.

Shared goals was a continuing theme among some interviews. The faculty expressed a desire to have more an environment that was more teamwork-oriented. "I think the main thing I like to see is a college that is aligned properly; that is working toward a vision or goals" (Participant E).

Participant A discussed a more personal experience in which she saw a need for a positive improvement for her department but felt her idea would not go far coming from her. She instead made side comments in passing to try and put the idea in the minds of those who had the means to make the appropriate changes. "I might make comments (suggestions for improvement) in passing. It will not have traction. It needs to come from the top, down. I am not

saying that the bottom up doesn't work on our campus but they can't get past certain formalities and traditions…" (Participant A).

Interestingly, all the interview participants were generally positive in their responses and had a hope for improved relationships with the university administration. The themes identified were positively stated in an effort to view the questions from a minimally subjective point of view and more of a constructive line of thought.

Other sub-themes or less commonly mentioned themes, such as, communication, acknowledgement, and trust are all focused on interpersonal relationships as are the three common themes mentioned above. Underfunded does not fall under interpersonal relationships but the repercussions of being underpaid may have an impact on interpersonal relationships.

**Discussion**

This qualitative study centered on the question of what builds trust between faculty and administrators that create a healthy mutually respective academic environment. This hypothesis was confirmed in the themes identified by the participants. Building relationships, autonomy, and a shared objective were the themes identified which support the social contact theory and the professionalization theory (Kezar & Sam, 2014).

Efforts by administration to build relationships varies from administrator to administrator. The significance of this study could help administrators to devote additional time and effort into investing in the faculty more as individuals. Additionally, a shared objective will be more transparent and easier to accomplish when more efforts in communication and relationship building can occur. In the Kezar and Sam (2014) study, the social contact theory was supported by interaction among administration and faculty resulted in dispelling negative stereotypes that prevented them from seeing contingent faculty as professionals (Kezar & Sam, 2014). Additionally, through the participation of all faculty members in shared governance and sense of community could be established and nurtured resulting in a more positive climate.

The significance of autonomy was widespread throughout the interview responses. The need to be trusted and the acknowledged was identified by more than one participant. The desire for faculty contributions to be "acknowledged and accepted" while having the "time, resources, and energy to do the research I want to do…" Administrators that recognize the need for autonomy and trust in the faculty to fulfill their duties was a need clearly expressed among the participants. Being allowed, as professionals, to create their working conditions can enable them to have a voice in changes within their college and, additionally, it could provide professional growth opportunities (Kezar & Sam, 2014).

**Future Research**

The social contact theory clearly supports this positive interaction with administration, faculty, and staff. Frequent interaction among these different groups will help maintain positive communication and dispel negative stereotypes (Kezar & Sam, 2014).

Additionally, the professionalization theory acknowledges professionals who strive for growth and development within their field. Creating autonomy for professionals within their working field will contribute to a better understanding of the system and how it works within the confines of the institution. Decisions made by policy makers are upheld at the administrative level. Professionals given an opportunity for autonomy will also need to consider and remain knowledgeable about the current expectations of the administration within their department (Kezar & Sam, 2014).

Bahls demonstrates in How to Make Shared Governance Work: Some Best Practices how administrators can apply shared governance in their current position immediately. He recommends administrators (1) Actively engage board members, administrators, and faculty leaders in a serious discussion of what shared government is (and isn't). (2) Periodically assess the state of shared governance and develop an action plan to improve it. (3) Expressly support strong faculty governance of the academic program. (4) Maintain a steadfast commitment to three-way transparency and frequent communication. (5) Develop deliberate ways to increase social capital between board members of the faculty (Bahls, 2014, p. 3).

This detailed approach to shared governance could be researched in future studies. These five practices place the social contact theory and the professionalization theory into positive action and would be beneficial to track the perception of shared governance among those who follow this practice for future research.


**Conclusion**

In any institutional shared governance structure there should be a mutual respect for the rights of the participants. Shared governance at any decision making level should be constructed to not only represent, but incorporate the views of faculty and staff. Shared governance will vary according to the particular institution and the established arrangements already in place. Nevertheless, a positive environment with open communication to further the standards and goals of the institution should be maintained at all times.


AFFILIATIONS

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