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Final Report of a Shared Governance and Communication Project

PREPARED BY

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PREPARED FOR

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I. Context

AGB Consulting was engaged by the Board of Trustees at Arkansas Tech University (ATU) to assist the Board in a project that focused on shared governance and communication. As an AGB Senior Consultant, I was charged to review salient documents, interview representative stakeholders and present a report to the Board of Trustees.

II. I reviewed a wide range of documents, including the following:

- A. “The 2021 AAUP Shared Governance Survey: Findings on Faculty Roles by Decision-Making Areas”
- B. ATU Documents:
 - i. Board of Trustees Bylaws, Faculty Senate Constitution and bylaws, Staff Senate Constitution and Bylaws, Student Government Association Constitution
 - ii. ATU Faculty Handbook
 - iii. Higher Learning Commission (HLC) 2020 report
 - iv. Restructuring Document presented to the Board of Trustees, March 18, 2021
 - v. November 2020 HLC final report
 - vi. Faculty Senate select minutes
 - vii. Staff Senate select minutes
 - viii. Faculty Senate Satisfaction Surveys (2019, 2020, 2021)
 - ix. Staff Senate Satisfaction Surveys (2019, 2021)
 - x. Communications Working Group Survey Report

III. Additional information was gathered during the assignment:

- A. WebEx interviews were conducted with stakeholder representatives:
 - i. Preliminary meetings with Vice Chair Duffield, Chair Burnett and President Bowen
 - ii. Members of the Board of Trustees
 - iii. Representatives of the Executive Council (EC)
 - iv. Leadership of the Faculty Senate, including the chair and the former chair
 - v. Representative of the Staff Senate
 - vi. Leadership of the Student Government Association
 - vii. Representative of the external community
- B. Because several interviewees mentioned a letter in the Spring of 2020 from the Black Faculty and Staff Organization (BFSO) to the President, I reviewed that as well.

IV. I took extensive notes on all documents. Some salient points include the following:

- A. While this report will focus on the specifics of shared governance and communication at ATU, it is instructive to place the specific institutional observations in a national context. A 2021 AAUP study of faculty involvement with institutional decision-making, especially focusing on change from 1971 to today, revealed that despite the fact that there were significant differences in types of questions and use of scales in the surveys over the 50 years, some comparisons could be drawn. According to the authors of this report, the results are not simple. According to the AAUP Report, nationally, there seems to be a drop in faculty authority in establishing programs while there is a possible small growth of faculty authority in the development of institutional curriculum and program curriculum. There are a couple of consistent patterns over the 50 years: there is little faculty authority in salary policies or in budget decisions. There has been a noteworthy drop in faculty decision-making in the allocation of positions and decisions regarding buildings and facilities. Over the years, faculty authority in tenure decisions and tenure track searches has grown significantly as has faculty authority in chair selection, and a small growth in faculty input in dean selection. Faculty involvement in teaching load decisions has remained substantially the same over the 50 years. These national patterns are comparable to observations I made regarding faculty authority in decision-making at ATU.
- B. The core ATU documents confirmed that the university has in place appropriate structures for good governance.
 - i. The bylaws and constitutions of the Board of Trustees, Faculty Senate, Staff Senate, and the Student Government Association provide evidence that there is a firm foundation for good governance at the university.
 - ii. One of the most helpful core documents in my study was The Faculty Handbook which provides important definitions and sets important expectations.
 - a. The Handbook describes “shared governance” as “[t]he complex variety of tasks performed by institutions of higher learning require interdependence amongst the Board of Trustees, the administration, the faculty and students. The faculty has primary responsibility for advice and recommendations in such fundamental areas as curriculum, research, faculty status, and aspects of student life that relate to the educational process.” (11)
 - b. The handbook describes the preparation of the operating budget as a “primary responsibility of the president” and describes it as a “fiduciary enabler with assurances to the Board of Trustees or state authorities that revenues and expenditures will be kept in balance and that institutional assets will be appropriately conserved or will grow proportional to future needs (192).”

- c. “Collegiality is not a separate criterion upon which any faculty member is assessed, but is assumed to be an integral aspect of the faculty member’s professional life. The absence of collegiality in all aspects of a faculty member’s professional life is considered to be a deficiency. Collegiality among associates involves appreciation of and respect for differences in expertise, ideas, and background, as well as cooperation and collaboration in achieving department, college, and university goals. The concept of collegiality, however, should be distinguished from congeniality; to be congenial is parallel with sociability and agreeableness, while collegiality is a positive and productive association with colleagues. A faculty member need not be congenial to be collegial.” (12)
- C. Two Criteria in the November 2020 HLC Final report provided helpful insights into the campus climate at ATU. The evaluation was a very positive one, with no recommendations for follow up by the institution.
 - i. The report asserts that ATU meets all core components for Criterion Two (Integrity: Ethical and Responsible Conduct, core component, 2c the Board of Trustees) and there is no requirement for interim monitoring. There is a report due on September 20, 2022, on academic assessment.
 - a. The report cited the importance of “Mission Moments” at board meetings where academic and support programs make presentations to the Board while also allowing the units “to express ideas directly to the Board as an element of shared governance” (21).
 - b. There is recognition of the challenges for the Board chair in the “necessity for the Board to ‘balance the equities’ through the upcoming restructuring and budget cuts while also still making facility improvements to stay competitive and attractive to students” (21-22).
 - ii. Criterion Five (Institutional Effectiveness, Resources and Planning, core component, 5A, Shared Governance) was also met. There were several points made with regard to how the institution engaged internal constituents through collaboration.
 - a. “Shared governance at the institution engages its internal constituencies—including its governing board, administration, faculty, staff and students—through planning, policies and procedures” (50).
 - b. “Each campus stakeholder group expressed involvement in committees, being heard and valued, and how broad the engagement has been across stakeholder groups in decision making since the arrival of the current President” (50).

- c. In summary on Criterion 5: “The ATU leadership is committed to a distributive model of shared governance that is inclusive of campus stakeholders and locations through campus committees, communication methods and the allocation of resources. Changes, such as the creation of the Staff Senate, the Budget Advisory Committee (BAC) and the Strategic Plan, have developed a culture of participation and cross-functional engagement that is appreciated and effective” (59).
 - d. Referenced in the report was a plan to redefine shared governance which was postponed because of COVID-19.
- D. In April 2020, a Communications Working Group Survey Report, an all-volunteer committee including faculty, staff and administrators, were charged by the President to focus on improvement in communication across the campus per item 3.6 in the strategic plan. There were several actions recommended to address concerns about communication and transparency (a number of which have already been acted upon, a number of which I reference in my recommendations below).
- E. My review of Faculty Senate minutes, Staff Senate minutes, Faculty Senate Satisfaction Surveys and Staff Senate Satisfaction surveys revealed stakeholder concerns. My review of these materials, particularly the “Three Year Results Summary” in the April 2021 Faculty Senate Survey, helped provide context to my understanding of the overall faculty perspective on campus climate and informed recommendations below.
- F. After President Bowen’s May 31, 2020, message to the university community, in the wake of the George Floyd murder, the BFSO wrote a letter to the president, which was eventually shared across the campus. The letter included a series of recommendations. The President met on June 25, 2020 with representatives of the group, taking action on a number of them, including additional police trainings, an open session for the campus facilitated by Donald Wood (Executive Director for Just Communities of Arkansas), several changes in hiring practices in the Human Resources office, assignment of an Executive Council member as liaison to BFSO, assignment of a BFSO member on an ongoing basis to the ATU diversity committee, and investigation by Human Resources of claims included in the attached letters by prior employees.
- G. The interviews I conducted with 24 representatives of the ATU community provided nuance to the issues of communication, transparency, shared governance, and campus climate. and provided suggestions for action.

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- H. The surveys I conducted in October provided little additional information, largely because of the low response rate (205 completed surveys of 809 distributed for the faculty survey and 226 completed surveys of 765 distributed for the staff survey). In addition, in the comments section of the faculty version of the survey, the validity of survey was questioned as was its usefulness.
- V. Overall observations:
- A. There is strong consensus on the student-centered nature of the university and there seems to be a high level of student satisfaction.
 - B. The shared themes of campus dissatisfaction, expressed by some stakeholders, included the following:
 - i. Lack of administrative responsiveness to stakeholder input
 - ii. Concern about genuineness of commitment to communication, transparency or shared governance by the administration
 - iii. Concern about priorities in budget allocation
 - iv. Concern about leadership
 - C. There were a number of recommendations from stakeholders that should remain in the purview of the president (such as, but not limited to, specific allocation of resources to particular departments/divisions and administrative appointments, e.g., provost position).
 - D. There were some reports of non-verbal expressions of disapproval of the president's performance by others that were outside the norms of civility or collegiality; however, in the surveys and interviews, the dissatisfaction was expressed strongly, but in a respectful manner.
- VI. I make the following recommendations for next steps:
- A. To enhance a renewed commitment to trust and collegiality, the Board might encourage the President, her administration and the University community in the following kinds of actions. While the Handbook definition of collegiality is meant to describe faculty interaction, it could be (should be) a description of interaction between all segments of the ATU community (see IVB3 for definition).
 - i. My first focus is on the recommendations included in the documents cited above. My rationale for that focus is to affirm the importance of input from stakeholders and to show respect for the work of all members of the community who participated in these important efforts. In the cases in which some

recommendations have already begun to be implemented, I recommend continuing and/or enhancing. In the cases in which the recommendations have not yet been acted upon, I am recommending consideration of enacting:

- a. There are a number of actions already taken that could be encouraged to continue and/or be enhanced:
 - i. Continue to include a faculty member and staff member at periodic EC meetings.
 - ii. Continue to include representative faculty and staff at the earliest possible time in budget development.
 - iii. Review the new methods of communication to assure that they are penetrating all segments of the campus, that they allow for two-way feedback, and that the sheer number of methods do not overwhelm the message.
 - iv. Complete the shared governance review referenced above, as follow up to HLC report.
- b. There are a number of actions that should be considered for action
 - i. Consider recommendations from the Communications Work Group Survey that should be pursued or continued/enhanced, including:
 - a. Developing a centralized university calendar.
 - b. Sharing the full report of the CWG report broadly on the campus.
 - c. Some recommendations need to be modified, such as sharing updates on the work of the EC rather than sharing EC minutes (since formal minutes are not kept of these meetings).
 - iii. Continue the previously implemented commitments by the President (see IVF above) discussed with the representatives of the BFSO and consider other actions (included as recommendations in the letter) to improve communication, transparency, and campus climate, including:
 - a. Continuing the ongoing review of Title IX.
 - b. Enhancing education and training to improve the community's understanding of cultural competence.
 - c. Reviewing whether the creation of a university-wide Chief Diversity Officer/Office/or Program would be useful in supporting the work of the Office of Diversity, Inclusion and Contemporary Student Services that currently exists.

- ii. An important action not suggested in internal documents would be to charge a small team of representatives from the Faculty Senate and the Staff Senate to review the surveys (particularly the most recent ones) to identify and prioritize actionable recommendations that would improve communication, transparency, shared governance and improve campus climate.

B. The Board might consider taking the following actions:

- i. Formalize faculty/staff presentations at Board Meetings.
- ii. Develop opportunities for informal interaction between Board members and internal stakeholders before, after or between meetings.
- iii. Use “Mission Moments” to focus on programs that enhance community morale.
- iv. Add a periodic Board education item to Board agendas.
- v. Consider formal and balanced methods of better incorporating internal and external stakeholder input (such as 360-degree evaluations) into the Board evaluation process of the President.

- VII. By engaging in this review, the Board is publicly supporting and endorsing a process that continues to recognize the value and importance of the contributions of each member of the ATU community. This process will continue to be based on the value of constructive dissent embracing the collegiality that is so well defined in the university’s Faculty Handbook. The Board should be commended for its commitment to open communication, transparency and principles of shared governance.

R. Barbara Gitenstein

About

Dr. R. Barbara Gitenstein, is president emerita of the College of New Jersey, and has over 40 years of experience as a college professor and administrator in both the public and private institutions. She came to the College of New Jersey from Drake University where she served as provost and executive vice president. She is the first woman to serve as president of the College of New Jersey in its 160-year history. Upon her arrival at TCNJ in 1999, Dr. Gitenstein enhanced academic rigor and faculty-student engagement, which led to a transformation of the undergraduate program. The high number who graduate on time, for example, has led to TCNJ being ranked 5th in the nation among all public colleges and universities for having the highest four-year graduation rate. Alumni giving has nearly doubled, the college's endowment has tripled, and TCNJ received its largest ever single gift: \$5 million. Utilizing the public-private partnership provision contained in the New Jersey Economic Stimulus Act of 2009, Dr. Gitenstein completed a contract for Campus Town, the college's first public-private partnership with a developer. Under Dr. Gitenstein's leadership, the college has invested more than \$380 million in its physical plant. Improvements include six academic buildings, housing for an additional 400 students, and the acquisition of 103 acres of property to add to the central campus of 289 acres.

Professional Credentials

Dr. Gitenstein earned her BA degree from Duke University and her PhD from the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill.