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Campus Clout, Statewide Strength: Improving Shared Governance through Unionization

By Bill Lyne

In 2002, the Washington State Legislature passed legislation allowing faculty at four-year state universities to unionize. The administration at my university, Western Washington University, took a dim view of the idea of a unionized faculty and launched an energetic, if fairly bumbling, campaign to convince faculty not to vote for the union. In one of their messages, administrators ominously suggested that by unionizing we would be moving from an academic and collegial shared governance model to a corporate and confrontational labor-management model.

This proved to be genuinely clarifying. As Faculty Senate president at the time, I knew better than anyone that the model we were operating under was governance of some sort, but it was definitely not shared. We had the usual array of committees, subcommittees, task forces, and endless meetings. We made recommendations that were routinely ignored and gave advice to deans and vice provosts who never hesitated to do whatever they wanted. All real decisions,

especially those concerning budget and the deployment of resources, were made behind closed administrative doors and delivered to faculty as foregone conclusions. Faculty who found themselves subjected to arbitrary and capricious decisions by administrators only had access to a grievance process that ended at the president's door. As senate president, I would meet with the provost every two weeks, and I usually arrived with a list of the ten ways that various deans had recently violated the faculty handbook. He would chuckle and say something along the lines of deans will be deans and that would be that.

So the administration's invoking "shared governance" vs. "labor/management" gave us the opportunity to perform some public relations judo and point out that what we currently had didn't even rise to a labor management model and could more appropriately be described as a parent/child model. We argued that if we wanted to return to a genuine arrangement of academic shared governance, unionization was our best bet. Only with the legal obligation to come to a bargaining table and negotiate in good faith with us over wages, benefits, and working conditions would the administration begin to share any of the real responsibility for managing and determining the direction of the institution.

During the organizing campaign, the administrators repeatedly tried to personalize our argument, insisting that they were decent people who had our best interests at heart and that unionizing would be an insult and a breach of trust. We responded that the problem was structural, not personal. I had had dinner with our president and played golf with the provost and could confirm that they were both gracious, charming, and fun people, but that didn't change the fact that their jobs gave them perspectives, pressures, and imperatives that were very different from, and often at odds with those of the faculty. With boards of trustees composed primarily of political appointees from mostly corporate backgrounds and ever-shrinking state budgets, public university administrators have been forced to become more concerned with money, politics, and public relations than they are with academic quality or academic freedom. They live with a constant imperative to do more with less and to adopt so-called "business models" that emphasize training over education and are often antithetical to

the interests of students and faculty. In such an environment, it's easy enough for the business of administration to begin to eclipse the primary educational mission of the university and for administrators and administrative functions to begin to multiply. Individual deans will have three or four administrative assistants, while large departments limp along with one. Tenure-track faculty lines wash away while teams of assessment specialists and assistant associate vice provosts proliferate. And these folks will relentlessly preach the gospel of "data-driven decision making" right up until you present them with the data on administrative growth and the relationship between administrative salaries and faculty salaries.

Again, this situation is not the result of administrators being bad people, but because they are people under a variety of pressures with a lot of local power and no real obligation to be accountable to faculty. There may once have been a golden age when faculty were genuinely involved in university budget and resource decisions, but those days are long gone.

University administrations are not, of course, obliged to include faculty unions in their budget decision-making, but they are legally obligated to negotiate binding contracts with faculty on wages, benefits, and working conditions. The administrators don't have to listen to us about how to spend the money, but they do have to agree with us about how much of it we get. And once a contract is signed, it is far more powerful than a faculty handbook or code. This has been proven dramatically in my state over the last couple of years. Our four regional comprehensive universities—Western Washington University, Eastern Washington University, Central Washington University, and Evergreen State College—are unionized, while our two research universities, the University of Washington and Washington State University, are not. When the state legislature imposed 25-percent cuts to university state appropriations in 2009, the University of Washington administration immediately raised faculty workloads and unilaterally suspended the merit raises called for in the Faculty Code, while all of the raises and workload provisions in our contract at Western remained intact. While my UW colleagues had scheduled raises suspended and saw their class sizes dramatically increased, I got my merit

increase and my workload stayed the same. And it wasn't that my administration didn't want to take away my raise and raise my workload, it was that it legally couldn't.

While it may not be ideal, there is no doubt that collective bargaining has led to much more sharing of governance of the university than we had before. It took us eighteen hard months to bargain our first contract, but that time spent locked together in a room was very educational for both sides. Unlike the faculty senate model, where we were only advisory to the administrators, they had to stay there until we reached genuine agreement, so eventually we had to start listening to each other.

Public university administrations are at a distinct disadvantage when it comes to the public rhetoric involved in negotiating a contract. In private-sector labor negotiations, management can come to the table and more or less tell the truth—we're a for-profit operation, we're responsible only to our shareholders, and our goal is to squeeze as much work as we can from labor for the lowest cost possible. University administrators must come to the table with the same rhetoric they use in public—our mission is to provide the best education possible for our students. When we point out that the best way to do that is with salaries and workloads that allow us to recruit and retain the best faculty possible, it's hard for them to argue with that.

In bargaining, we were able to educate the administration about the reality of faculty work and the things that really matter to faculty. At the same time, we learned a lot about the predicament of administrators. Eventually, we were able to drop the pretense that, on the ground, we all had the same interests and to negotiate compromises that we could live with. And with that negotiation came mutual respect.

Our contract is something we both agreed to and have to make work, not something that one side imposed on the other under the smokescreen of "consultation." This, ironically enough, has led to a dramatically improved relationship between the faculty and administration.

It has also made the faculty much more responsible and accountable to ourselves. Collective bargaining is not magic; it is simply more legally binding power for the faculty. It is, of course,

entirely possible to take that power and screw it up. Those of us who have fallen into union leadership have had to constantly remind ourselves that we represent the faculty as a whole and that we must be responsive to faculty concerns. We had to work hard to make sure that we didn't lose touch with rank and file faculty and that we didn't live up to any of the prevailing fears and myths about unions. Many of our colleagues, especially those from the business school and the sciences, were sure that we would level salaries across disciplines, protect mediocre faculty at all costs, and start campaigning for social and political causes that had nothing to do with university working conditions. So we have had to make sure to remember that we represent all of our colleagues, to recruit leaders from all departments and colleges, and to make it clear that we don't cover up for bad faculty but we do make sure they are treated fairly. And many of us, including me, have had to put our personal political commitments aside, endure the withering looks of our radical friends, and make sure that union political work stays focused on faculty and education.

And it is in that political work that we have perhaps forged our strongest bond with our administration.

While we still have a lot of disagreements on campus, once we step off campus, especially as we head toward the state capitol in Olympia, there is very little daylight between us and our administrative colleagues. When we're talking to the governor and the state legislature, we're both primarily interested in one thing: more state appropriations for public four-year universities. And our unionization has been a tremendous help for the entire university system in Washington. When our university presidents and lobbyists go to Olympia, they are armed with little more than the power of persuasion. As state agencies, universities are very limited in the kind of advocacy they can engage in and are not allowed to use any state resources to organize students and alumni. Thus, they bring almost none of the two things that politicians care about most—money and votes.

Through our affiliation with the Washington Education Association (the biggest union in the state) and the American Federation of Teachers Washington, we at the United Faculty of

Washington State are connected to 90,000 members and over a million dollars in PAC money. Using union time and union resources our leaders and members are not restricted in their advocacy efforts and can do all the things that unions do. The governor meets with university presidents two or three times a year, while she meets with the president of the WEA once a week. The speaker of the house will accept my invitation for lunch and tell our university lobbyist that she should work with legislators in her own district. Smart administrators understand the value of their faculty and staff unions. At Western, we have been able to form a strong coalition for legislative work and it has helped us keep bad times from becoming worse. This coalition has also paid dividends for us back on campus. The strong working relationship we have with our administration in Olympia has carried back to Bellingham and enhanced an environment of mutual respect.

I don't want to romanticize unionization. There are still a lot of genuine differences and disagreements with administrators, trustees, resolutely anti-union faculty members, and statewide affiliates. And no matter what system you have, dumb people in key positions making dumb decisions can always make things bad.

But the state of shared governance on our campus right now is the best it has ever been in the fifteen years I have worked at Western. And the biggest reason for that is that our faculty now have the statewide strength and campus clout that comes with collective bargaining.

Bill Lyne teaches African American literature at Western Washington University and is the president of the United Faculty of Washington State.