

A 25-year History of the American Association of University Professors' Perspective on Shared Governance at Historically Black Colleges and Universities

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Abstract

Little research has been done on faculty governance at HBCUs and because the work that has been done has often fails to include the voices of faculty members, we know very little about the inner workings of shared governance and respect for academic freedom at these institutions. This article uses historical methods to examine the experiences of faculty members in shared governance processes at HBCUs. The primary data sources are American Association of University Professors' (AAUP) reports on violations of shared governance or academic freedom. These reports span a 25 year period.

In a 2004 article in the *Journal of Negro Education*, James T. Minor argued that “criticisms endured by [Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs)] and their leaders have been made in the absence of contextual understanding that may shed a different light on the appropriateness of governance structures and decision-making practices used in these institutions” (p. 42). Because little research has been done on faculty governance at HBCUs and because the work that has been done has often fails to include the voices of faculty members, we know very little about the inner workings of shared governance and respect for academic freedom at these institutions.

This article uses historical methods to examine the experiences of faculty members at HBCUs. The primary data sources are American Association of University Professors' (AAUP) reports on violations of shared governance or academic freedom. These reports span a 25 year period.¹ As the AAUP is wholeheartedly committed to the preservation of academic freedom and shared governance, and dedicated to the perspectives of faculty members, this history is focused on the lived experiences of faculty rather than administrators. As such, this research should be juxtaposed with studies that take into account the perspectives of HBCU administrators. Another note of caution for readers: AAUP reports are written by faculty members at institutions throughout the country who are asked to serve on investigating committees when a violation of academic freedom or shared governance occurs. These occurrences are reported by the HBCU faculty themselves to the AAUP and the AAUP subsequently investigates the situation (Gasman et al., 2007).

Of note, the faculty investigation committees are typically diverse in terms of gender and institutional affiliation of their members. However, as the AAUP has been a predominantly

¹ AAUP censure reports date back to the organizations establishment in 1915. However, we are only examining a 25 year period.

White organization since its existence, there has not always been ample racial and ethnic diversity on the investigating committees. In addition, it is sometimes difficult to get faculty from HBCUs to serve on the committees because the AAUP membership contains few HBCUs. Membership fees can be costly given the relatively low salaries of HBCU faculty members. AAUP does have a Committee on Historically Black Colleges and Universities and Faculty of Color that works to increase membership from these institutions but the recruitment process has not been wholly successful.² As a result of this committee's work and that of the new General Secretary Gary Rhoades, more attention has been paid to the composition of investigating committees and the AAUP's relationship with HBCUs (personal communication, November 2009).

Background on Shared Governance at HBCUs

The majority of research related to faculty governance at HBCUs has been conducted by higher education researcher James T. Minor. He has interviewed administrators, department chairs, faculty senate chairs, and some members of the faculty. His research overall shows that HBCUs are not monolithic in nature when it comes to issues of shared governance (nor in any other way, for that matter). That said, Minor claims that the teaching mission of HBCUs and the possible paradox that this mission presents as well as the racialized climate are essential to understanding governance within the HBCU context. Of most importance, he argues that "those without an understanding of the context [of HBCUs] are susceptible to making unqualified comparisons between HBCUs and predominantly White institutions which usually renders HBCUs deficient" (p. 49). Minor does acknowledge that there are problems at HBCUs in terms of the lack of structure for empowering faculty senates, institution-wide understanding of shared governance and a need for a cultural shift that enhances trust and communication around these issues (Minor, 2004; Minor 2005).

Minor also makes an important statement in his research by indicating that HBCUs should not be compared to historically White institutions "without declarations that give significance to such distinctions" (p. 49). Moreover, Minor states, "Although many functional elements of teaching and learning are similar to other institutions, the historical foundations, cultural aspects, student population, and racialized climate" distinguishes many HBCUs from other sectors of American higher education (p. 49).

Minor's research is essential to our understanding of issues of shared governance and academic freedom at HBCUs. However, much of his research incorporates the perspectives of provosts and department chairs to a fault. He does interview faculty members and member of the faculty senate and provides comparison data on these groups' divergent opinions. For example, Minor's data show that 75 percent of HBCU provosts saw shared governance as an important part of their institution's identity. However, 75% of HBCU faculty did not think the concept was valued at their institutions (Minor, 2004). Still, more research is needed that looks at the faculty members' perspective and their experiences (Minor, 2005). Perhaps one of the most important ideas that emerged from Minor's work is that the problems of one HBCU do not represent those of all the others.

² One of the authors is the chair of the AAUP Committee on Historically Black Colleges and Universities.

Contributions from scholars related to faculty governance at HBCUs have been largely personal in nature. For example, in 2002, Ivory Phillips, a professor at Jackson State University wrote a scathing depiction of faculty governance at HBCUs. Specifically, he noted that the lack of participation in academic decision making has allowed “more than a few black colleges” to make academic program decisions without faculty input (p. 50). On the other end of the spectrum, but also writing about her experience at an HBCU, Beverly Guy-Sheftall (2006) of Spelman College talks about the many ways that empowering faculty can benefit all constituencies at HBCUs – most importantly students. In her words, “assertive, committed, and engaged faculty members are critical to any college’s well-being and continued growth, while passive, disengaged, or fearful faculty members contribute to an institution’s stagnation and imperil its future” (p. 34).

The most recent article pertaining to HBCUs and academic governance is that of Marybeth Gasman’s (2009) thought piece on HBCUs during the recent economic crisis. In this article, Gasman looks at the impact of tightened budgets, enrollment shortages, and endowment shrinkage on the leadership approaches of HBCU presidents. She provides context for the decision making processes at HBCUs and also points to examples of the best leadership in terms of respecting faculty autonomy, academic freedom, and shared governance, as well as some of the worst.

Trends across the Past 25 Years

Over the past 25 years, eight HBCUs have been censured by the AAUP for their alleged violations of AAUP policies on academic freedom and shared governance. These institutions are: Clark Atlanta University (2010),³ Stillman College (2009), Benedict College (2005), Virginia State University (2005), Meharry Medical College (2004), Philander Smith College (2004), the University of the District of Columbia (1998), and Talladega College (1986). Each of the censure reports was based on interviews with administrators and faculty, with the bulk of the interviews being conducted with current and dismissed faculty members.

Although the AAUP has no authority over the nation’s colleges and universities, most institutions of higher education respect the tenets put forth by the organization. These tenets include the following beliefs: faculty members should have the freedom to conduct research without constraint, faculty members should have the freedom to teach on matters of their expertise without interference, and after an initial probationary period of no longer than seven years faculty members should be installed in a permanent position with tenure unless there is due cause not to do this. According to the AAUP, any deviations from these procedures should be spelled out explicitly in an institution’s faculty handbook (www.aaup.org). Of vital importance to the AAUP is that faculty members who have tenure only be terminated in cases of “bona fide” financial exigency (www.aaup.org).

As noted, in the past 25 years, there have been 8 HBCUs that have been censured. This number represents 21 percent of the institutions censured. Given that HBCUs only represent 3% of the nation’s colleges and universities, this number is disproportionate. One might conclude that because the AAUP is a predominantly White organization, some institutional racism is at play –

³ It should be noted that one of the authors served on the investigating committee of the Clark Atlanta University case.

especially given the make up of the upper level administration throughout the organization's history and the investigating committee composition. That said all of these censure cases were initiated by the HBCU faculty members at the respective institutions. Although some of the faculty members have been White, the majority is Black.

A review of the 8 HBCU censure cases reveals some important themes that cut across these institutions. These include the violation of explicit policies outlined in the faculty handbook; the initiation of post-tenure review processes with no prior knowledge; inconsistent requirements across the faculty and the denial of due process; presidents who curtailed freedom of speech or criticism of the administration, and boards of trustees that granted the president the power to make all academic decisions without faculty input.

In all cases, the administration vehemently violated faculty handbook policies. At Talledega College in Talledega, Alabama, for example, faculty members were denied the protection of academic due process despite these procedures being detailed in the written policies of the institution. Specifically, the president at the time dissolved the Faculty Concerns Committee, eliminating one of the main venues for faculty due process and voice at the institution (Talledega College AAUP Report, 1986). At Benedict College in Columbia, South Carolina, faculty members' termination appeals were upheld by faculty review committees but were revoked by the institution's president and the Vice President of Academic Affairs. The Benedict administration took these actions despite having explicit policies stating that faculty determined if other faculty should be terminated (Benedict College AAUP Report, 2005). Meharry Medical College administrators used a similar approach. When the faculty senate made recommendations to the president, he rejected them. Moreover, the president commended faculty who operated with a "management" or "business" mentality (Meharry Medical College AAUP Report, 2004).

The AAUP has been "skeptical" of post-tenure review and as such does not favor such policies (AAUP, 1999). They find procedures that are initiated without faculty input and without proper notice and due process to be especially problematic. At Virginia State University in Petersburg, Virginia, two professors were terminated after they were evaluated in a post-tenure review process. Of note, the process was not part of the faculty policies when it was implemented (Virginia State University AAUP Report, 2005). A similar situation took place in 2010 at Clark Atlanta University in Atlanta, Georgia. After claiming that the institution had an "enrollment emergency" (that was denied by the former Vice President of Enrollment Management), the administration terminated 55 members of the faculty – 20 of whom had tenure. The administration developed mysterious criteria for faculty review without faculty involvement to evaluate faculty members' performance. None of the standing faculty committees – including the university senate, the academic counsel, and the council's curriculum committee were consulted. According to Clark Atlanta's faculty handbook, faculty should have played a role in all decisions pertaining to faculty hiring, evaluation, and dismissal. In effect, the tenured faculty participated in a post-tenure review without their knowledge (Clark Atlanta University AAUP Report, 2005).

At all of the HBCUs examined in this essay, faculty members were denied any form of due process. In some cases, this happened during a post-tenure review. In others, as mentioned, formal committees were ignored or dissolved. In some cases, such as at Clark Atlanta

University, faculty members were given only hours to make decisions about severance packages and releasing the institution from blame (Clark Atlanta University AAUP Report, 2005). Likewise, at the University of District of Columbia in Washington, D.C. and Meharry Medical College in Nashville, Tennessee, faculty members were terminated with little notice and were given limited severance and no process for appeal (University of District of Columbia AAUP Report, 1998; Meharry Medical College AAUP Report, 2004).

Another consistent problem across the HBCUs was the curtailment of faculty members' freedom of speech as well as any criticism of the institutions' administration. At Talladega College, faculty claimed that the president asked students to tell him when faculty members talked about him in their classes. They also stated that the president had a "get even" attitude when it came to faculty who were not one hundred percent supportive of his decisions (Talladega College AAUP Report, 1986). At Benedict College, faculty members who spoke to the press about any discontent were punished and they were not allowed a venue for challenging the assertions of the administration (Benedict College AAUP Report, 2005). At Stillman College in Tuscaloosa, Alabama, faculty members not only had no voice in shared governance nor protective policies in the faculty handbook, but they were not allowed to speak out publicly about their dissatisfaction with the administration. Faculty members who were interviewed said they were "silenced and scared" (Stillman College AAUP Report, 2009). At Philander Smith College, located in Little Rock, Arkansas, the president at the time, issued an edict that faculty members were not to speak to the media (Philander Smith College AAUP Report, 2005). One tenured professor did so and was summarily dismissed by the president. The campus ethos was one of not challenging the administration, especially the president (Philander Smith College AAUP Report, 2005; Gasman, 2009).

The last theme that permeated the AAUP reports was that of heavy-handed boards of trustees. Whereas most boards of trustees at colleges and universities are advisory, HBCUs have a history – dating back to their early days when boards were mainly composed of White philanthropists – of being involved in many of the day to day decisions of the institutions (Anderson, 1988; Gasman, 2007). At Talladega College, for example, faculty members were banned from attendance at board meetings and as mentioned earlier, the board allowed the president to make all academic decisions, ignoring the input of the faculty (Talladega College AAUP Report, 1986). Likewise, at Virginia State University, the board of trustees actively protected the interests of the administration but ignored the needs and concerns of the faculty (Virginia State University AAUP Report, 2005).

Implications for the Future of HBCUs

Although it is critical to consider the context and history of HBCUs – one of few resources and a constant fight to prove worthiness – respecting faculty input, governance, autonomy, and academic freedom is essential to a vibrant educational environment. As Beverly Guy-Sheftall, a professor at Spelman College, argued, it is crucial that HBCUs move from being "president-centric" to a culture of shared decision making when it comes to academic matters, including "tenure and promotion policies, faculty hiring the faculty handbook, curriculum review, faculty grievances, and [program development and review]" (2006, p. 31). Her president, Beverly Tatum, for example, immediately reached out to the faculty when she became president. Tatum

encouraged regular communication sessions with the faculty council so that frustrations would not fester and to give faculty a voice at a high level. The Spelman president, in effect, shifted the power on campus through her outreach to faculty (Guy-Sheftall, 2006) and she sent a clear signal that faculty are valuable to the institution.⁴

Likewise, Walter Kimbrough, the new president of Philander Smith College has made similar gestures to build a positive climate for faculty on the campus. Immediately upon taking the presidency, he worked to get the institution off the AAUP's censure list. He clarified and enhanced Philander Smith's tenure process and with the faculty's help, ensured a system of due process for grievances. He promoted the idea of shared governance and rescinded the previous president's edict related to speaking to the press. Kimbrough had to push a faculty that was scared to disagree to be one that actively participated in shared governance (Gasman, 2009). In fact, in 2010 the institution worked, with Kimbrough's unsolicited blessing, to establish a chapter of the AAUP on campus (personal communication, March 12, 2010). Perhaps most promising are Kimbrough's efforts to create an ethos on campus that fosters debate and discussion – he believes that the best ideas and the greatest creativity spring forth from this type of climate (Gasman, 2009).

The efforts of both Presidents Tatum and Kimbrough help to move the institutions forward and lesson the “president-centric” nature of governance. Other HBCUs should look to these presidents and their actions for role models. Presidents and HBCU campuses will benefit from seeing faculty as integral to the campus and advocates for students success rather than adversaries. A happy, empowered faculty makes for a vibrant, energetic, and success-oriented campus.

Often the general public as well as those in HBCU administration (and those at historically White institutions) fail to see the uniqueness of the college and university environment. Institutions of higher education are not for-profit businesses.⁵ Instead they are non-profit organizations that are dedicated to the education of students. Education is not a perfect science or a money-making venture. Education thrives in an environment characterized by freedom of expression, critical thinking, challenge, and the freedom to propose ideas – be they wonderful at first glance or seemingly senseless. Of note, challenge and critical feedback only makes an individual or an institution stronger.

HBCU presidents often have to lead and manage within a racialized context – one in which they are constantly defending the importance and very existence of their institutions. However, this context does not negate their responsibility to the very individuals who hold the future of African American young people and many other underrepresented students in their hands. As higher education scholar James T. Minor (2004) stated, “As HBCUs seek to resituate themselves in the current environment of higher education, the ability to define the governance context is critical. Doing so will enhance decision making and institutional effectiveness while strengthening their defense against critics” (p. 50).

⁴ It should be noted that Johnnetta Cole, who was president of Spelman College earlier in Guy-Sheftall's tenure paved the way for faculty governance at Spelman.

⁵ Of course there are for-profit institutions. We acknowledge that shared governance and academic freedom are not tenets of these institutions.

The most dangerous side-effect of a lack of respect for tenure and shared governance on the part of some HBCU presidents is that these actions harm all HBCUs for years to come. The problems of a few HBCUs are often generalized to the entire group based on ignorance and sometimes racism (Gasman, 2007). HBCU presidents should work diligently with their faculty—at all ranks—to strengthen policies that ensure and even promote faculty input and governance. Having more ideas and more voices contributing to the future of the institutions can only enhance HBCUs. Just in any relationship, egalitarianism and open communication lead to greater harmony and growth.

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