Reflections on Faculty Governance at the University of Hawai‘i at Mānoa

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According to Part II, Section C of the accreditation report, the Board of Regents has authorized the development of formal faculty organizations on each campus and charged these organizations with the responsibility for making recommendations or providing advice on academic policy for a particular campus. Two such bodies that served in the role of policy recommendation, as well as recommendations leading to the hiring of a new Mānoa Chancellor, were the UH Mānoa Faculty Senate and the Mānoa Chancellor Search Committee. Thanks in no small part to the facilitation of President Dobelle, both the senate and the search committee had active roles in the governing of the university and the selection of a new chancellor during the 2001-2002 academic year. For example, the chair of the senate participated in all senior administrative team meetings at both the system and the Mānoa campus level. In addition, the search committee for the new chancellor was made up of fifteen members, seven of whom were faculty. Thus, faculty played a central role in the selection of the new chancellor and the governing of the university during the 2001-2002 academic year.

During this crucial year I served as Chair of the Faculty Senate for Mānoa and as the Chair of the Search Committee for the new chancellor. Both were heavy responsibilities, but I was supported in these endeavors by a wise and hard working Senate and an equally wise and hard working chancellor’s search committee. As I sit here today, I realize that we quite possibly would not have the wonderful new chancellor we have at Mānoa without the efforts of these two groups in fashioning a compelling job description and pouring over the many applications while we looked for someone who would lead us in this new century. The selection of a new chancellor, after approximately fifteen years in which the campus functioned without one (except in the dual role of system president), played a crucial role in shaping the future governance of the campus. The arrival of Peter Englert, with his dedication to Pacific Island peoples (as well as issues of access, equity, and consultative governance), provides the campus with a sense of promise and new possibilities.

During the 2001-2002 academic year the senate was busy launching a major new General Education core. This, too, was a test of faculty governance procedures, as the responsibility for the shape and structure of the curriculum had previously fallen on administrative shoulders. Developing and delivering a new curriculum involved a lot of hard work by faculty who were willing to step forward and work through the myriad questions about what makes an educated citizen, inquiries that always arise when one undertakes curricular reform. However, once these issues are addressed, the work has just begun. There are still major questions about course content, syllabi, requirements, how to coordinate with community college offerings, etc.

Inevitably, tensions arise about what various factions on campus feel is imperative for students to learn (languages? ethics? communications? sciences?) and turf wars are
always in danger of breaking out. For instance, Mānoa struggled with questions about whether to require a language for all undergraduate majors several years ago and the fires still smolder only slightly underground now that the issue has been resolved. These questions are complicated by Mānoa’s particular geographic circumstances in the middle of the Pacific and its responsibilities to the Native Hawaiian culture and peoples. Inevitably the culture wars that exist in the larger society are played out on campus and tend to bog down faculty governance processes. While these tensions threaten always to render the faculty governance process dysfunctional, because of their good hearts and minds, the Mānoa faculty have continued to play a vital and productive role in the governance of the university.

I am grateful to Evan Dobelle and Deane Neubauer for their faith in faculty governance procedures and their foresight in placing faculty at the center of these processes. I believe that decisions are better when they involve the thoughtful consideration of many stakeholders. Decisions about faculty participation by university administrators always create tensions between responsibility and authority. Yet even with these problems I have learned that processes lumber along, excellent work is accomplished, and the university not only survives, it thrives.

During my year as Faculty Senate Chair, the faculty more than met the challenges they faced. They have and are continuing to meet the various demands inherent in the governance of a modern university. That participation, in turn, creates a university system better able to shape, or at least influence, learning in the twenty-first century.