

Shared Governance and Social Capital Theory: A Qualitative Study of Perceptions and Outcomes

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ABSTRACT

Although shared governance is widely promoted as a democratic and collegial decision-making model in higher education, its implementation in public universities remains underexamined. Shared governance, a concept that is widely touted yet wildly varied in implementation, is the best path forward for decision makers. To better understand shared governance and how it might best be practiced, this qualitative study uses data from faculty at one public university to understand perceptions and outcomes of shared governance. Viewed through the lens of social capital theory, data analysis leads to a specific set of recommendations that consider cultural and structural changes for shared governance.

Keywords: Shared Governance, Faculty perceptions, Faculty Governance, Public University

The shared governance model holds its foundation in the 1966 joint statement from the American Association of Governing Boards, the American Council on Education, and the Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges (Berdahl & Gove, 1982). This key proclamation defined the responsibilities of faculty and administrators in the decision-making process and introduced the concept of shared governance. Since then, shared governance has become prevalent on university and college campuses (Jones, 2011). Leaders of higher education institutions have a lot to consider when making decisions that impact operations and the institutional environment. Along the way, they must consider who should be involved in the decision-making process and if the balance of power proportionately reflects the investment of the stakeholders and their responsibility to implement change. That is the essence of shared governance.

However, there are diverse viewpoints about the role of shared governance in higher education (Kater, 2017). Faculty view shared governance as a fundamental responsibility of being a professional on a college campus (Lewis, 2011; Sam, 2021). Faculty expect active participation in shared governance through governing boards and committees (Lewis, 2011; Sam, 2021). Often, faculty indicate a desire for a greater voice in a college's decision-making process, impacting college operations (Beebe, 2017). Administrators are likely to have a different perspective on shared governance. For some administrators, shared governance is not responsive enough to handle today's rapidly changing educational landscape (Schoorman & Acker-Hocevar, 2013). Administrators argue that the shared governance practices currently utilized no longer fit the needs of the educational system (Schoorman & Acker-Hocevar, 2013). Many criticize shared governance as an inefficient and outdated model of decision-making. Administrators who value adaptability, speed in decision-making, and efficiency in operations often bypass faculty to make immediate business-driven decisions (Schoorman & Acker-Hocevar, 2013).

Although shared governance has been generally accepted by the university community in the U.S. and many other developed countries (Huang, 2017; Moodie & Eustace, 1974; Mortimer & McConnell, 1978), its meaning and practice remain unclear in developing countries. It is, therefore, important to have a comprehensive understanding of the role of shared governance to influence policies, procedures, and the process of institutional decision-making to ensure equal balance of power and stakeholder engagement over periods of time. In an effort to better understand shared governance and how it might best be practiced, this study uses data from faculty to develop a specific set of recommendations for shared governance reform. The research questions guiding this study are:

How do faculty perceive shared governance?

What do faculty see as the outcomes of shared governance?

This article is organized into five sections. First, a review of the literature takes the reader through a summary of the history of shared governance to current and future topics related to shared governance. Then, the theoretical framework and the design of the study are explained. After that, the findings are presented in three parts: faculty perceptions, outcomes of shared governance, and specific recommendations for improved shared governance. Finally, the discussion section relates the findings and the theoretical framework and makes clear that improving shared governance is about improving the culture and structures of an institution.

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Shared governance is not easily defined (Campbell & Bray, 2018; McGuire, 2019). Scholars and practitioners have been unable to reach a consensus on a definition of shared governance, which has resulted in a lack of clarity on the part of the faculty and a major source of their conflict with administrators over decision-making authority. On many college and university campuses, the concept of shared governance is often misunderstood and highly debated (Beaudry & Colby-Sawyer, 2015). Definitions of shared governance can be found throughout the literature (Kennedy et al., 2020). Guanci (2018) defines shared governance as a structured process for the partnership of stakeholders in decisions that foster equality, accountability, and ownership. People who are delegated after the decision has been made bear the responsibility in the process of making the decision. The American Federation of Teachers (2020) says that shared governance is where the college faculty and staff take part in deciding how an institution shall operate. Shared governance has been described by Campbell and Bray (2017) as a multi-dimensional process that gets faculty and staff involved in the decision-making process. All three of these definitions identify shared governance as a system of empowerment that includes faculty and staff in the decision-making process of an institution. The said definitions, however, do not elaborate on how a system of shared governance is implemented. Shared governance may be defined as a balance between faculty and administration participation in the process of decision-making that is characterized by inclusion, empowerment, and accountability (AtashzadehSadoughi et al., 2019; Beaudry & Crockford, 2015; Cowen, 2018; Kater, 2017). Tierney (2000) has urged that institutions begin to direct more attention to the internal dynamics of governance processes as opposed to focusing all our efforts on meeting external demands for change.

Despite such definitions, shared governance still falls under the sphere of misunderstanding. Studies demonstrate that one of the major misconceptions is that all parties are satisfied with what is being shared (Reed, 2017). This kind of skewed expectation often pits faculty versus the administration, and at times, against each other (Kater, 2017). In a mixed-method quantitative study carried out by Johnson et al. (2017) regarding faculty perception and involvement in leadership, faculty reported generic tension between the administration when governance processes were not clearly defined. On the other hand, faculty indicated that they valued their voice in shared governance. Misconceptions about shared governance are numerous. For example, shared governance does not mean that the decision-making is equally distributed between stakeholders, and all involved have the authority to make decisions (Atashzadeh-Sadoughi et al., 2019; Cowen, 2018). Shared governance does not mean that all stakeholders participate at every stage in the decision-making process or are involved in every decision of an institution (Cowen, 2018). In a shared governance model, faculty and staff do not have control of the decision-making process. Faculty and staff are part of the decision-making process (Atashzadeh-Sadoughi et al., 2019; Cowen, 2018).

Shared governance involves balancing participation between faculty and administrators in institutional decision-making, emphasizing inclusion, accountability, and empowerment (Atashzadeh-Sadoughi et al., 2019; Beaudry & Crockford, 2015; Cowen, 2018; Kater, 2017). Effective communication, which is often carried out through committees, working groups, and everyday interactions, is essential to this process (Cowen, 2018). Continuous communication and timely updates on institutional matters help foster genuine collaboration between faculty and administrators (Atashzadeh-Sadoughi et al., 2019; Beaudry & Crockford, 2015; Cowen, 2018; Kater, 2017). Higher education institutions continue to develop their shared governance model through continuous discussions between faculty members and administrators (Tinberg, 2018). The success of shared

governance depends on all stakeholders establishing clear expectations and procedures and desired outcomes (Guanci, 2018; Marchiondo et al., 2021). A well-defined shared governance framework enables faculty and administrative roles to work together effectively by establishing common expectations, which leads to increased faculty participation and better institutional performance (Campbell & Bray, 2018).

History of Shared Governance

The first four-year educational organization established in 1636 was Harvard College within Harvard University, and the first two-year institution established in 1901 as Joliet Junior College served Christian churches to train clergy members (Bailey, Jaggars, & Jenkins, 2015). The first academic institutions began as private initiatives that church leaders controlled through governance by boards of directors. The board members at these institutions maintained complete authority to direct management and make all decisions (Facchini & Fia, 2021; Honu, 2018). The boards were responsible for making financial and academic decisions and selecting faculty members. The boards of early institutions maintained direct control over all operational aspects of these institutions. At that time, faculty members worked part-time, so the decision-making process at institutions primarily involved administrators without their input. The primary duty of the faculty members consisted of classroom teaching. The boards operated with minimal contact with faculty members because the institution managed itself through its administrators (Kennedy et al., (2021). The limited governing conflicts between boards and faculty members directly resulted from their limited interaction (Honu, 2015).

The introduction of the Morrell Act of 1862 and land-grant institutions brought about a shift toward shared governance in American higher education (Pierce & Trachtenberg, 2014). Higher education institutions now receive state and federal government support, which has led the board of governors to transfer decision-making powers to professional administrators (Honu, 2015). A bureaucratic governing system emerged because experienced administrators needed a professional administration system to implement the board's vision (Garrity, 2015). Early administrators focused on developing operational policies and procedures as well as managing enrollment, facilities, and daily operations of an institution, but they excluded faculty from decision-making (Gravett & Anderson, 2020). Faculty continued to remain a part-time profession. Institutional governance remained in the hands of the boards and administration. The governance process included limited faculty involvement, but the faculty maintained control over academic matters within their classroom boundaries (Gravett & Anderson, 2020; Honu, 2018).

Faculty members transitioned to full-time status as professionals after the GI Bill Serviceman's Readjustment Act of 1944 became law at the end of World War II (Honu, 2018). American higher education experienced an academic revolution because service members and high school graduates enrolled at colleges and universities in unprecedented numbers (Honu, 2018). The governance role of higher education faculty members expanded after World War II (Honu, 2018). The faculty profession became full-time. The involvement of faculty members by administrators became common through their participation in developing policies, institutional planning and budgeting, and academic administrator selection and evaluation processes. Faculty members started participating more in day-to-day operations between 1944 and the late 1950s, according to Honu (2018).

Higher education institutions adopted shared governance principles during the 1960s (Jones, 2011; Kezar, 2019; Olson, 2009). The American Association of University Professors (AAUP), together with the American Council on Education (ACE) and the Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges (AGB), stated the importance of shared governance in higher education through the 1966 document (Jones, 2011; Kezar, 2019; Olson, 2009). The definition of shared governance emerged from this proclamation, describing institutions as collaborative operations with specific decisions distributed among different groups (Olson, 2009; Tinberg, 2018). The document specified the responsibilities of Presidents and faculty members, administrators, and trustees during the governing process (Kezar, 2019; Tinberg, (2018).). The management of endowments belonged to the trustees, but institutional advancement fell under the President's authority, and curriculum development rested with the faculty. The joint statement did not establish specific guidelines for shared governance yet supported a decision-making process involving multiple stakeholders in the institution—academia-wide institutional support (Kezar, 2019). The AAUP, ACE, and AGB shared governance declaration has significant impacts because the AAUP stands for faculty rights, while ACE focuses on

administrator development, and AGB sets governing board best practices (Jones, 2011; Kezar, 2019; Olson, 2009). The endorsement of shared governance from the principal faculty and administrative advocates proved that shared governance represents an essential concept for American higher education (Olson, 2009).

The emergence of research universities during the 1970s and faculty professionalization led to the initial implementation of shared governance at four-year institutions (Beaudry & Crockford, 2015; Jones, 2011). The 1970s brought quick enrollment growth alongside student demographic changes and political shifts, making four-year institutions more challenging to govern (Beaudry & Crockford, 2015; Jones, 2011). The governance process needed faculty assistance from administrators during this time. Four-year institutions witnessed an expansion of faculty decision-making authority as shared governance developed on their campuses (Beaudry & Crockford, 2015).

Perceptions of Shared Governance

Studies have indicated that faculty and administrators often hold different perceptions regarding shared governance on college campuses (Campbell & Bray, 2018; Hardy et al., 2019; Kater, 2017; Tinberg, 2018). These differing perspectives directly impact how institutions design their shared governance structures (Curnalia & Mermer, 2018; Kater, 2017). Institutions can clearly define responsibilities and processes when faculty and administrators have aligned expectations about their roles (Kater, 2017; Tinberg, 2018). Conversely, unclear or mismatched expectations between these groups may create tensions and reduce governance effectiveness (Campbell & Bray, 2018; Kater, 2017). The relationships and mutual understanding between faculty and administration enhance shared governance participation, ultimately contributing to institutional success (Kater, 2017; Tinberg, 2018).

The application of shared governance in higher education fosters an array of opinions on the issue (Curnalia & Mermer, 2018; Kater, 2017). The governance structure of an institution can potentially make a work environment better or worse for an institution (Owen et al., 2018). Researchers have determined that administrators perceive shared governance differently from faculty members (Chaudhry, 2017; Kater, 2017). In Campbell and Bray's (2018) quantitative investigation into shared governance, administrators preferred a participatory model of governance versus a shared model of governance. Administrators desire to conduct and lead with open communication, truth, and equity (Tinberg, 2018). In the case of financial crisis or decreasing enrollment, administrators must make decisive choices. Shared governance is at best a cumbersome process through the decision-making process and often hinders decisions made quickly (Hardy et al., 2019). Campbell and Bray (2018) said the administrators viewed shared governance as a form of management that had become "outdated." A related qualitative study also evidenced the fact that administrators tended to view shared governance differently than do faculty members. In this vein, the comparative study found that administrators tend to view shared governance as cumbersome and archaic. Subsequently, they are increasingly beginning to adopt more prominent business approaches while moving away from the shared governance model. As a function of such an understanding, the above-referenced authors provide an alternate theory of causation by noting that contingent faculty tended to rise at an exponential rate in schools that sought to increase their spending funds on other areas rather than incurring further expenditure on the establishment and construction of additional adjunct facilities. Owen et al. (2018) argued very little, if any, empirical research had taken place to this effect at the university and community college levels.

The administrators claimed that shared governance is an outdated system and, in most cases, the faculty do not want to share the decision-making powers. Cowen (2018) wrote that administrators felt shared governance tends to water down the decision-making process. Administrators felt shared governance models are too sluggish to respond to the quickly evolving landscape (Leon & Vega, 2021; Schoorman & Acker-Hocevar, 2013). Administrators made the case that the shared governance practices were no longer relevant to the current educational system (Leon & Vega, 2021; Schoorman & Acker-Hocevar, 2013). Many deride shared governance as an ineffective and anachronistic model of decision-making (Reed, 2017). Further, administrators allege faculty have no interest in shared governance. There is some evidence to back this argument. In a qualitative study exploring faculty perception of shared governance, Kater (2017) determined faculty apathy and disengagement in shared governance as a significant theme in the study. Faculty shared they were involved on committees and faculty senates because they were coerced by other faculty or by leadership to assume this

responsibility. As Kater (2017) points out, there are so many reasons for faculty apathy and disengagement, some of which are workload, organizational structure, and culture. It becomes beside the point that faculty apathy and disengagement in the governance process can thus be seen as not wanting to participate by the administration. This is according to Kater (2017), who holds that shared governance has to be a truly collegial process where faculty and administration establish two-way communication in the process of decision making. Kater (2017) showed that two-way communication was usually reported as a factor that motivated faculty to partake in governance. Kater (2017) suggested some identified vehicles for communication that build on networks and eventually build trust between the faculty and administration. School administrators who believe in being adaptable, swift in decision-making, and operational are likely to make direct decisions based on business needs and missions without necessarily consulting the faculty (Schoorman & Acker-Hocevar, 2013). In most cases, administrators pursue a lean and efficient governance model with the ability to make rapid, decisive change. Many administrators argue that only an agile institution with a flexible governance model can survive in such a rapidly changing higher education landscape. Sometimes administrators adapt a more corporate governance model, which establishes a business-like culture that seeks efficiency in the educational system and in the process of decision-making. Often, the adoption of a business governance model seems to exclude the faculty from the process. To administrators, the benefits derived from adaptability, speed, and operating effectiveness supersede those drawn from inclusiveness and faculty engagement (Beaudry & Colby-Sawyer, 2015).

The governance structure of an institution directly impacts faculty members (Atashzadeh-Shoorideh et al., 2019; Chaudhry, 2021). Decentralized power structure and participatory decision-making process are the factors that attract faculty towards shared governance (Atashzadeh-Shoorideh et al., 2019). Shared governance models place the faculty parallel with administration in the process of decision-making, which in return increases governance participation (Atashzadeh-Shoorideh et al., 2019). For the faculty, shared governance is extremely important (Lewis, 2011). Active participation in the governance process, through faculty governing boards, and committees is included among the professional responsibilities of the faculty (Sattarzadeh-Pashabeig et al., 2020; Lewis, 2011). In institutions of higher learning, administration, boards, and policymakers are steered by the faculty through shared governance models (Hardy et al., 2019).

In a qualitative study completed by Kater (2017), the faculty reports were consistent in wanting a voice regarding institutional issues. According to Kater (2017), for faculty to develop trust with administration, it required critical communication and transparency. Other studies agreed with this view as most faculty desire to have a more prominent say in how a college decides and prioritizes those actions that drive the activities of the college (Beebe, 2017; Owen et al., 2018). Faculty insist that shared governance allows for faculty collaboration with administrators (Owen et al., 2018). Faculty involvement in governance can ensure campus-wide "buy-in" with faculty opinion (Hardy et al., 2019). Based on the assumptions, a study by Owen et al. (2018) showed validation whereby satisfaction levels with their job were higher among the faculty who were empowered to take part in and be actively engaged in institutional governance. There was also reported growth in effectiveness and productivity by the empowerment of the faculty. An increase in job satisfaction was associated with higher work engagement and commitment to the institutional mission among faculty members as well (Owen et al., 2018). Johnson et al. (2017) conducted a qualitative study regarding the perceptions of faculty concerning their involvement and leadership in shared governance. In the end, they discovered that the faculty valued the opportunity to participate in college governance. The more faculty felt they had a voice in governance, the more engaged they were in the overall decision-making processes. Johnson et al. (2017) called for an environment that appreciates faculty voice in governance, valuing the enhancement of faculty participation and involvement in the functioning and success of the institution. Failure to involve faculty in decision-making can lead to institution-wide "opt-out" and eventually, failure (Hardy et al., 2019).

Among the many benefits of shared governance, to faculty, there will be more engagement, pride in the institution, and increased trust in the organization and administration by the faculty (Jones, 2011; Marchiano et al., 2021). Shared governance increases faculty job satisfaction through providing a supportive and inclusive work environment (Owen et al., 2018). Shared governance also contributes to relationship building, shared purpose, and collaboration (Campbell & Bray, 2018). Such relationships foster faculty support of an institution's mission, vision, and values (Campbell & Bray, 2018). Faculty argue that the erosion of shared

governance results in diminished faculty involvement and low morale (Beaudry & Colby-Sawyer, 2015). To faculty, shared governance directly links the board, the President, the administration, and students in a collaborative partnership (DeBoy, 2015). The faculty argue that well-applied shared governance can harness the collective knowledge, mentorship, and experience of faculty toward bettering an institution.

Principles of Shared Governance

Although the official concept of shared governance is defined by faculty participation in the institutional decision-making process, existing research shows that there is no universal consensus on the level of faculty participation in conceptualizing shared governance (Birnbaum, 2004; Brown, 2001; Jones, 2011). In a national study of over 3,800 individuals from more than 750 colleges and universities in the U.S., Tierney and Minor (2003) found that, from the perspectives of the university community, shared governance implies different levels of faculty participation. Some posit that shared governance refers to fully collaborative decision-making where the faculty and administration make decisions together, and consensus should be achievable. Others argue that shared governance should be defined as consultative decision-making where the faculty provides consultations, but the administration and the trustees make the final decisions. In another scenario, some define shared governance as distributed decision-making in which each constituent makes decisions in certain areas in which they are in charge. While shared governance emphasizes faculty participation in institutional decision-making, the level of faculty participation varies.

Trust and Shared Governance

Previous research suggests that faculty members' trust in institutional leadership influences their degree of involvement in institutional decision-making processes (Dufty, 1980; Pope, 2004). Mishra, 1996 posits that trust plays a vital role in shared governance, shaping social interactions and acceptance, and is often assessed through competence, openness, benevolence, and reliability. These dimensions have been used extensively in studies examining how individuals perceive trustworthiness within professional relationships (Pope, 2004). According to Dufty (1980), trust influences three levels of faculty participation: political inactivity, political alienation, and political opportunity. Political inactivity is characterized by low participation but high trust, occurs when faculty members are minimally involved due to confidence in leadership. Political alienation shows low participation stemming from faculty perceptions of having limited influence on decisions. Political opportunity describes high participation arising from faculty mistrust toward institutional leadership. Pope (2004) later expanded on this framework, introducing a fourth category called political equilibrium, which describes high participation combined with high trust, where faculty actively engage in institutional decision-making despite their confidence in leadership. Increased trust fosters stronger faculty motivation to engage in decision-making, ultimately facilitating effective shared governance (Tschannen-Moran, 2000).

Soft Governance and Hard Governance

It is the culture of soft governance that builds trust among constituents of an institution (Birnbaum, 2004). Soft governance refers to the systems of social connections and interactions that develop and maintain the group norms or human behaviors, while hard governance encompasses the systems of structures, regulations, and sanctions of an institution that define the authority relationship (Birnbaum, 2004). Soft governance and hard governance are the two attributes of shared governance in a system approach (Birnbaum, 2004). In this instance, hard relates to the formal systems of institutional governance, and soft relates to the informal systems. Both hard and soft governance can be mutually reinforcing, and thus, they help create the institutional customs and practices followed by the constituents during the decision-making process.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

There are many ways social capital theory can be used to understand organizational structures and cultures. For this study, social capital theory explored the perceptions of shared governance as viewed by faculty. Researchers state that the social capital theory enabled essential empirical studies and discussions that shifted research to examine personal relationships in organizational networks to enhance performance and life quality (Gannon, 2018; Golderblom, 2018; Kater, 2017). Kater (2017) emphasized the importance of social capital by

demonstrating its function in uniting fundamental elements from sociology, social support, integration, and social cohesion. The theory shows how people acquire advantages through trust, interchanges, transparency, information, and cooperation within their relationships and networks instead of emotional relationship experiences (Putnam, 2017). According to theorists, social capital creates worth for all members of interconnected networks (Gannon, 2018; Putnam, 2017). Social capital theorists explain that trust development happens through direct person-to-person encounters with special emphasis on direct face-to-face interactions (Putnam, 2017). The foundation of interpersonal trust develops through individual interactions with each other (Gannon, 2018). Trust between people creates a basis for trust in extended social institutional frameworks. Social institutions demonstrate shared values, virtues, and expectations of organizations such as governments, churches, and businesses (Claridge, 2004; Kater, 2017; Putnam, 2017). The fundamental dimensions of social capital create positive perceptions of satisfaction and confidence toward such organizations (Claridge, 2004; Putnam, 2017). Trust breaks down when people stop interacting with each other and fail to build relationships. Trust breakdown leads to relationship breakdowns which then causes network failure and social disturbances (Claridge, 2004; Kater, 2017). Social capital functions as the unifying force that maintains connections between people, networks, organizations, and entire communities (Putnam, 2017).

The research needed to explore how faculty members perceive shared governance required analysis of their trust-based relationships with the administration, according to Campbell and Bray (2017). Social capital, representing trust and cooperation between faculty members and administrators stands essential for shared governance to achieve proper operation within an institution (Campbell & Bray, 2017). Institutions with minimal social capital experience negative tensions and mistrust between their faculty members and their administration (Campbell & Bray, 2017). The fundamental requirement of social capital theory demands that faculty members develop relationships with administrative staff (Campbell & Bray, 2017; Gannon, 2018; Kater, 2017; Putnam, 2017).

Three types of social capital trust must exist to establish a well-working shared governance model in an institution (Awan, 2014; Seunghwan & Hyungjun, 2016). The three trust levels Awan (2014) described are strategic trust, institutional trust, and organizational trust. The confidence of faculty members and staff in executive leadership forms the foundation of strategic trust, according to Awan (2014) and PytlikZillig et al. (2017). A strategic plan, together with a long-term vision and mission, should be developed and shared by institutions to establish strategic trust (PytlikZillig et al., 2017). The strategic trust foundation begins with the board of trustees and the President of an institution. A successful institution depends on faculty members and staff trusting the executive leadership and board of trustees to create mission statements and strategic plans that lead institutions to success (Awan, 2014; PytlikZillig et al., 2017). The development of strategic plans and mission statements, along with long-term visions, helps faculty members form their first impressions about institutions while they learn about these institutions (PytlikZillig et al., 2017; Seunghwan & Hyungjun, 2016). Getting to know an institution's direction and expectations leads to trust development (PytlikZillig et al., 2017).

Faculty trust their managers or supervisors as a fundamental aspect of institutional trust (Awan, 2014). Specifically, managers will treat individuals equitably and consider faculty needs when making strategic decisions. Workload distribution will be fair, and the educational environment at the institution will provide suitable learning opportunities according to faculty trust. An institution reaches its operational peak at the point known as institutional trust. Implementing executive leadership vision occurs through faculty interactions at various levels, including committees, workgroups, and department meetings. Faculty members spend most of their time developing their institution's perceptions while building trust at this level of social capital (Six et al., 2015).

Finally, organizational trust refers to faculty members' faith in the institution, which is achieved by believing the institution keeps its promises to employees and maintains consistent processes (Awan, 2014). Institutions should create structures and processes to allow faculty members to develop trust by experiencing trust-building opportunities (PytlikZillig et al., 2017; Six et al., 2015). The organizational trust focuses on operational activities that involve policy establishment, academic calendar development, and physical infrastructure maintenance. Staff members who understand institutional procedures will establish trust as they become familiar with the operations (PytlikZillig et al., 2017; Six et al., 2015). An institution generates social capital

through developing interaction mechanisms that allow faculty members to build trust and commitment toward the institution (Six et al., 2015). A highly functioning shared governance model depends on the development of three essential social capital types, according to Awan (2014), Pytlik-Zillig et al. (2017), and Six et al. (2015).

RESEARCH METHODS

Setting

The setting for this study was a large urban-serving research-intensive university in the capital and southern part of Ghana. The institution is research-intensive and has four colleges. The university has over 60,000 students and over 6,500 employees. Those employees include nearly 1500 full-time faculty and nearly 500 part-time adjunct faculty members. The university is one of the oldest public universities in Ghana. Compared to similarly situated institutions, the size and age of the institution are relevant for the purposes of this study since governance structures and processes are well established.

Research Design

This study used a qualitative explorative single case study approach to explore faculty perceptions of shared governance deeply. According to Creswell (2014), qualitative research facilitates understanding the meanings individuals or groups assign to social or human issues. Given the lack of information on understanding shared governance perceptions and practices at Ghanaian public universities, employing a qualitative approach with a general inductive method was appropriate (Merriam, 2016; Thomas, 2006).

Qualitative researchers operate from the assumption that truth is subjective and varies among individuals who interpret events and experiences uniquely. How we perceive reality as subjective comes from Descartes' (1912) philosophical ideas, which state that objective realities need personal interpretation to gain meaning. This research approach depends on essential interpretative principles while giving prominence to participant voices (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The results of qualitative research cannot be obtained through statistical analysis because this research method differs from quantitative approaches (Cope, 2015; Rahman, 2017). The research method focuses on comprehending how participants experience life through their emotions, social environments, behaviors, and interactions (Queiros et al., 2017; Rahman, 2017). According to Cope (2015), qualitative data analysis involves identifying patterns, themes, and complex behaviors in non-standardized data. Yin (2018) indicated that single-case studies effectively address "how, why," and "what" questions about phenomena. The single-case study enabled researchers to gather detailed data from participants through interviews and questionnaires, according to Yin (2018). The main advantage of this method lies in its ability to study real-life situations by observing the phenomenon in its natural environment (Yin, 2018). The research studied faculty members' views about shared governance within that institution. Cope (2015) and Rahman (2017) explained that case studies work best when the research environment and duration are well established. The research spanned eight weeks and used open-ended interview questions to gather participants' views and experiences. The individual interviews provided faculty members with an unbiased platform to share their thoughts about shared governance.

Individual Interviews

Using a snowball sampling method, interview participants were asked to identify additional faculty members who would be helpful to interview as well. Ultimately, 12 faculty members were identified and invited to participate. The research study sent individual invitations to the faculty members, soliciting their consent to participate. The invitation included the purpose of the study and requested faculty consent to participate in the study. The interviews were conducted utilizing Zoom for video conferencing as the means of data collection.

Data Analysis

The recordings of all of the individual interviews were meticulously transcribed. Once the transcription was complete, participant information was de-identified, and the transcripts were coded accordingly. Given the sensitive nature of the topic and highly specific answers and examples, coding participants was critical to

ensure confidentiality of the participants' respective responses. Given the complexity and variety inherent in qualitative data, I utilized multiple coding approaches to comprehensively capture and categorize relevant information. To complement and enhance the rigor of manual coding, I also used AILYZE, a qualitative analysis software. AILYZE, an online AI tool for qualitative data collection and analysis, was used to generate content and thematic analyses on the documents. Recent qualitative research studies (such as Adel & Nancy, 2023; Floris, et al 2024; Raymer & Nelson, 2023) have used AILYZE and achieved high accuracy and low bias, especially when used with human oversight. AILYZE uses an inductive approach to theme identification by analyzing the entire dataset, which helps avoid the limitations of traditional coding methods that focus on single responses and may overlook broader themes or complex discussions. This method also ensures consistent theme detection across various segments of data and significantly speeds up the analysis process. However, recognizing that AI-based tools may overlook contextual subtleties, interpret participant language too literally, or miss culturally specific nuances, human oversight was integral throughout the process. As the researcher, I engaged in iterative reviews of both the raw transcripts and the AI-generated codes and themes, and refined them based on context, theoretical alignment, and emergent patterns that reflected the participants' voices. This hybrid approach helped mitigate potential biases and ensured that the final themes remained grounded in the lived experiences and institutional realities expressed by participants. The combination of AILYZE's pattern detection capabilities and human interpretive judgment enhanced the trustworthiness, credibility, and depth of the findings.

FINDINGS

From the data collection utilized, several themes emerged. The first set of themes is related to faculty perceptions of shared governance, and the second set of themes is around outcomes of shared governance.

Faculty Perceptions of Shared Governance

Three major themes emerged from the data about faculty perceptions of shared governance: (1) Structured participation with limited influence, (2) Inclusivity and collaborative culture, and (3) Opportunity to provide input. The collected data went through a systematic coding process to identify primary themes, followed by categorization and theme development. Three distinct themes emerged, as outlined in Table 1

Table 1 Themes that emerged on faculty perceptions

Themes	Sub-themes
Structured participation with limited Influence (faculty perceptions of limited influence despite structured participation)	Some involvement Formal structures with some level of impact Centralized and hierarchical decision-making
Inclusivity and collaborative culture	Hierarchical Structures Stakeholder Engagement Formal committees
Opportunity to provide Input	Provide input. Ways of providing input

Structured participation with limited Influence: Several participants perceived shared governance as more structured participation but with limited influence. Many faculty members reported some kind of involvement through committees, departmental meetings, and formal governance structures. One participant noted:

When it comes to making major decisions, my influence feels pretty limited. It's like I'm part of the process, but the final calls are usually made at higher administrative levels.'

Some participants also described that even though they participate in the governance process, their activities are limited. However, some participants also expressed their view that final decisions frequently rest with higher administration, limiting their influence in the governance process.

When it comes to making major decisions, my influence feels pretty limited. It's like I'm part of the process, but the final calls are usually made at higher administrative levels.'

Junior faculty often feel excluded from key governance roles, as some participants stated in the interview that their participation is minimal, mainly because early-career faculty members are not always included in key governance structures.' Participants perceive that representation is stronger at departmental levels but becomes symbolic or less genuine at university-wide decision-making levels. One participant noted, "My voice tends to be adequately represented at the departmental level; however, at higher levels, my voice is somewhat represented but occasionally feels symbolic rather than influential". When asked to provide examples of why he thinks that representation is symbolic, he stated that financial and strategic decisions are often centralized, further limiting faculty impact.

When asked to provide examples of how faculty participated in the shared governance process at the institution, participants identified formal ways they participated in the governance process. One participant stated in the interview, "I have worked on many different committees associated with student success and providing services to students." Many faculty members reported some involvement through committees, departmental meetings, and formal governance structures. However, participants also expressed those final decisions often rest with administrators, thus limiting faculty influence. Some faculty selectively engage in academic governance where they feel their voice matters, avoiding broader administrative governance due to perceived inefficiencies. In general, participants perceive shared governance as participatory but constrained by hierarchical structures and administrative dominance that limit their substantive influence.

Inclusivity and collaborative culture; Many participants described the shared governance process as inclusive and representative. One participant described it as any governance system that ensures that all stakeholders have a voice in the administration of a system. This was supported by most participants who described shared governance as an activity for all stakeholders in the university, sharing the governance of the university, indicating a perception that governance should be a collective effort involving various university members. Likewise, another participant described in the interview:

"Well, I can say that through committee meetings on academic issues, my voice is represented in a way," which is why I feel we have recognition in terms of representation, particularly in academic committees".

In similar ways, participants supported the notion that shared governance is an inclusive and collaborative culture. Where faculty members, administrators, and sometimes students all have a role in shaping policies that affect academic and administrative affairs. However, while the structures exist, some participants feel their involvement in governance does not receive the weight it deserves. One participant noted:

"Shared governance is a mechanism that, in theory, allows faculty to contribute to decision-making. For me, it signifies academic freedom and professional autonomy, but in practice, it often feels like a formality rather than a meaningful engagement process." Participant mentioned during the interview that shared governance is a collaborative leadership model involving faculty, administration, and other university stakeholders, this indicates that faculty perceive shared governance positively as a structure that allows meaningful contributions from various stakeholders toward institutional success.

Opportunity to provide Input: Generally, participants indicated that shared governance is an opportunity for faculty to provide input in the decision-making process at the university.

One participant stated in an interview,

“As acting chair, my voice tends to be adequately represented at the departmental level. However, at higher levels, especially university-wide decision-making, my voice is somewhat represented but occasionally feels symbolic rather than influential, particularly when strategic institutional decisions are made without sufficient input from faculty leadership.

When asked to provide examples of how faculty participated in the shared governance process at the institution, one participant noted:

“I feel my voice is represented to some extent, especially within my department. At the departmental level, decisions are generally collaborative. However, at higher administrative levels, I feel less represented because decisions often seem predetermined, with limited consultation or transparency”.

Faculty members primarily participate through committees such as academic planning, faculty senate, promotion and tenure reviews, curriculum development committees, departmental meetings, and electoral processes for selecting chairs and deans. Having a voice in decision-making boosts job satisfaction and gives faculty a sense of professional autonomy and reinforces our academic freedom, which is important for staying motivated and engaged.

Outcomes from Shared Governance

The data showed that faculty see two overarching themes as the outcome of shared governance: enhancement of academic quality and opportunity to build working relationships. Study participants spoke about the need to build student-centered outcomes, pedagogical freedom, and academic standards as shown in table 2.

Table. 2 Themes that emerged from what faculty see as the outcome of shared governance

Themes	Sub-themes
Enhancement of academic quality and curriculum development	Curriculum responsibilities
	Academic Standards
Opportunity to build a working network	Relationship Building
	Working as a team

Enhancement of academic quality Curriculum Development: During the interviews, several participants reported that shared governance allows them to advocate for curriculum revisions and student-centered assessment methods that improves academic quality. One participant noted that persistent faculty engagement led to approved curriculum changes and more continuous assessment and that the shift from theoretical exams to project-based assessments improved student engagement and critical thinking. Effective shared governance ensures curricula remain current and relevant, whereas ineffective governance could lead to diminished academic quality. Participant further linked governance effectiveness to faculty morale and academic standards, noting disengagement when governance falters.

As exemplified through this participant’s experience, faculty have a perception that Changes in course structure and assessment methods were influenced by faculty input. Faculty highlight that shared governance

enables their input into curriculum development, leading to more relevant, practical, and student-centered curricula and assessment methods. Participants described how the introduction of student-centered teaching and practical learning components influenced faculty governance. Effective governance ensures curricula remain aligned with academic standards and industry demands, enhancing student learning, while ineffective governance risks stagnation and rigidity. One participant offered:

“Faculty governance has helped introduce more student-centered teaching methods. For instance, our department recently revised assessment policies to incorporate more continuous assessment based on faculty recommendations.

Opportunity to build working relationships with stakeholders; Clearly participants were of the view that shared governance creates the platform for faculty to build working relationships with stakeholders across the university. One Participant stated in the interview:

"So, the networks come from the meetings I normally have with the various departments within my college. As the dean, you are sometimes required to liaise with faculty and administration to get things done... It helps us build an environment in which team members feel comfortable speaking up to share their opinions”.

Shared governance facilitates interdisciplinary communication, collaboration, and trust-building, encouraging departments to jointly address institutional challenges. When governance practices falter, departmental silos become more pronounced, reducing effective institutional collaboration. It supports collaboration in making sure we are represented in leadership roles and decision-making processes.

When asked about how shared governance facilitates collaboration, participants suggested that, through shared governance, faculty members have suggested moving away from purely theoretical exams to include more project-based assessments. This change made the course more engaging, and students not only grasped the material better but also developed critical thinking skills. The practice of Shared governance provides a platform for regular communication, collaborative problem-solving, and interdisciplinary initiatives. Collaborative decision-making between faculty, administration, and sometimes students was seen as essential for maintaining transparency and mutual accountability.

DISCUSSION

Though still fighting the ivory tower image, higher education is a much more diverse enterprise than it was in 1971 and has, in many ways, become more responsive to external demands. But the demands are also more diverse and, perhaps, heavier. Technological developments afford new and unique ways for people to learn, and, currently, there are serious questions about the value of credentials from post-secondary institutions.

Given this existential urgency, we can, again, look to social capital theory to understand how to respond to the situation. This theoretical framework is what makes this particular study a valuable contribution to literature. That is, if higher education is going to thrive in these challenging and uncertain times, all stakeholders must work together to make decisions that are the best for the institution and that have the most internal legitimacy as possible. It is social capital that describes established relationship networks that generate productive benefits for network members. The theory shows how people acquire advantages through trust, interchanges, transparency, information, and cooperation within their relationships and networks instead of emotional relationship experiences (Putnam, 2017).

The first theme describes shared governance as a structured participation with limited influence. Most participants reported that although they serve on committees, attend departmental meetings, and are represented on academic boards, their influence on institutional decision-making is minimal, particularly at the strategic or financial level. Faculty participation is often consultative rather than authoritative, resulting in a governance model that gives the appearance of inclusion while maintaining centralized administrative control. The finding implies that meaningful governance requires more than structural presence; it demands that faculty voices shape, not merely support, institutional decisions. University leadership must reflect on how decision-making authority is shared across governance layers and consider reforms that give faculty members

representation and real influence. The research participants pointed out that faculty councils and department committees function as channels for sharing governance and decision-making responsibilities at the university. The findings demonstrate that institutional governance operates through established roles that provide both predictability and transparency. Such formalized structures align with Birnbaum's (2004) concept of hard governance, yet the findings also highlight the equally important but less visible role of soft governance, which merits deeper examination.

The research showed that shared governance at the case institution operates through complex relationships between hard and soft governance systems. The formal structures, committees, senates, policy guidelines, and administrative hierarchies demonstrated complex governance by defining roles and responsibilities. Participants acknowledged these organizational structures as vital for institutional order, yet they commonly described them as ceremonial while lacking meaningful faculty control. Faculty members participated in academic committees and departmental meetings, yet they believed major strategic and financial choices remained concentrated at higher administrative levels. The perception supports a bureaucratic system that maintains decision authority with a small group of individuals, thus making procedural participation extensive yet limiting actual faculty influence.

The enabling factor for meaningful faculty participation emerged through interpersonal trust, collegial engagement, and informal communication networks, representing soft governance. Faculty members who built strong professional connections with deans and committee chairs gained more influence in educational decision-making. Department faculty members experienced higher engagement and empowerment because they operated within close professional relationships and shared institutional values. The findings show that soft governance acts as an inclusion mediator through trust and collaboration, even when complex governance structures remain rigid. The research demonstrates that shared governance achieves its best results by combining formal procedures (complex governance) with relational practices (soft governance) that strengthen faculty voice and institutional trust.

From the second theme, faculty generally perceive shared governance as an inclusive and collaborative culture, at least in principle. Faculty noted that statutes and academic policies provide faculty engagement and consultation mechanisms, particularly in academic matters such as curriculum development and program review. However, this inclusive culture appears to be unevenly experienced across faculty ranks. The inclusion and collaboration culture from the study showed uneven participation. In the study, the junior faculty felt excluded and cited a lack of access to high-level committees or leadership positions. The results are consistent with those of Dufty (1980) and Pope (2004), who found that institutional politics often occur when individuals are formally included in governance structures but lack the real opportunity to influence outcomes. The faculty members defined shared governance as a collaborative system promoting inclusivity, yet the actual inclusivity levels differed between groups. The observed contradiction reveals an important distinction because inclusivity is a theoretical concept, yet its practical execution remains inconsistent. The participants recognized that formal structures promoting faculty participation through committees, senate meetings, and departmental consultations demonstrate institutional dedication to collaborative governance. Several junior faculty members expressed their restricted influence in high-level decision-making processes while stating their voices received unequal weight. The governance system appears designed to be inclusive, yet institutional, cultural, and hierarchical elements restrict actual inclusion and empowerment for members. Perceived inclusivity and collaboration exist as aspirational goals partially achieved based on an individual's position in the institutional hierarchy. The implication from the finding shows that governance must be inclusive in principle and equitable in practice for all faculty members if they are to make positive and meaningful contributions.

The third theme emphasize that it provides faculty the opportunity to provide input faculty consistently reported the desire to have their voices heard in matters of the institution on several topics, including research, curriculum, course evaluation, program evaluation, advising, and academic standards. Research has shown that faculty participate in multiple ways, including committees, faculty councils, and other institutional groups (Bowen & Tobin, 2015). In addition, faculty provides input on research, curriculum, course evaluation, program evaluation, advising, and academic standards hence, faculty and administrators should identify meaningful ways for faculty involvement in shared governance decision-making

From the Data collected, faculty perception on the outcomes of shared governance revealed that shared governance contributes positively to curriculum development and academic quality. Faculty participation in departmental reviews, course design, and program assessment ensures that academic offerings remain current and relevant to the required standards. This finding reinforces previous scholarship that links faculty involvement in governance to improved academic rigor and responsiveness (Hardy et al., 2019; Owen et al., 2018). The implication is that shared governance enhances the institutional capacity for curriculum reform, especially when faculty have the autonomy and authority to influence academic policy. University leadership should continue to support and expand faculty-led committees and review structures as central vehicles for ensuring academic excellence and innovation.

Further to this, participants of the study reiterate that shared governance directly impacts teaching effectiveness and classroom practices. Through their participation in institutional governance, the study participants actively influenced curriculum development and advanced assessment reform and implemented pedagogical strategies that more directly responded to students' evolving needs. It is important to note that shared governance and its impact on learning and classroom experience are not widely documented or supported in the existing shared governance literature. Most prior research has focused on how governance affects institutional policy, leadership dynamics, and academic autonomy (e.g., Kater, 2017; Hardy et al., 2019) rather than its influence on pedagogy or learning environments. As such, study contributes a new dimension to the discourse and signals future research opportunities. The finding that faculty perceive shared governance impacts the learning and classroom experience is vital because the more faculty participate in the shared governance process, the more input is provided to administrators, resulting in decisions made by leadership that impact the classroom and, ultimately, students. The point is that effective shared governance positively impacts student learning because it ensures curricula are up-to-date, relevant, and responsive to students' needs. The study reveals that shared governance affects instructional structures, yet the relationship between governance structures and pedagogical outcomes remains uncertain. Future research should explore this connection directly, especially when curriculum reform, assessment changes, and instructional innovation depend on faculty governance responsibilities.

Finally, participants were of the view that shared governance allows for building working relationships with stakeholders across the university. The study found that shared governance promoted relationship building, common purpose, and collaboration. These relationships fostered faculty support of an institution's mission, vision, and values. The implication of this finding is that the shared governance process enables faculty to interact with constituents from across the university. These interactions allow faculty to build stronger working relationships. The development of strong relationships between faculty members can lead to better university operational performance. The participants reported positive results, but they also mentioned their worries about administrative control, bureaucratic obstacles, and hierarchical participation barriers. The implication is that faculty identified both direct and indirect outcomes of shared governance in academic quality, institutional trust, collaboration, job satisfaction, and teaching and learning. While faculty acknowledged several positive impacts, the effectiveness of these outcomes is contingent on the authenticity and inclusivity of governance processes. These perceptions offer important implications for university policy, academic leadership, and institutional culture.

Therefore, based on the literature review, as well as data collected through interviews, the answer to all research questions comes down to two overarching categories to consider improving the practice of shared governance: structure and culture. Cultural components suggest a need to increase trust, engagement, and the value of engaging in shared governance. Structural components speak to the need to standardize systems, increase decentralization, and expand faculty participation. Cultivating relational trust through soft governance practices can be vital for an institution to be competitive in the rapidly changing higher education landscape. University administrators should interact with faculty members sincerely while creating spaces for inclusive dialogue and maintaining collective responsibility. It is recommended that university leadership expand faculty participation to include areas traditionally dominated by administration in order to promote a more balanced and empowered model in the governance process. Lastly, selecting a common definition of shared governance can place administrators and faculty on the same page and provide a guiding principle for developing a shared governance model.

CONCLUSION

Although this study focused on a specific public university in Ghana, the findings offer broader insights into shared governance practices across African and other Global South contexts. The identified tensions, such as structured participation with limited faculty influence and uneven inclusivity across faculty ranks, resonate with existing research from universities in similar developing country contexts. For instance, governance literature from sub-Saharan Africa consistently notes the prevalence of centralized administrative decision-making, bureaucratic rigidity, and symbolic inclusion of faculty (Asiyai, 2015; Bisaso, 2017; Mugabi, 2020). Comparable studies from universities in East Africa underscore similar faculty frustrations with governance mechanisms that exist formally but provide limited substantive influence (Bisaso, 2017; Mugabi, 2020).

The research results confirm these observations by showing that Ghanaian institutional governance problems follow regional patterns which stem from postcolonial governance systems and resource limitations and bureaucratic practices that originated during colonial times (Asiyai, 2015; Saint, 2009). Consequently, the insights from this Ghanaian case illuminate systemic issues likely prevalent across many universities in developing regions. Addressing these challenges requires reforms simultaneously targeting structural governance mechanisms and institutional cultures, emphasizing genuine stakeholder empowerment, relational trust, and transparent administrative processes (Bisaso, 2017; Mugabi, 2020; Saint, 2009). Thus, this study contributes to the specific literature on Ghanaian higher education governance and offers meaningful implications for governance reform in the broader Global South.

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