

Bulletin



The Bulletin is a publication provided to Members to address issues of interest that may have an impact on Members' academic lives.

Collegial Governance

What is collegial governance? This is an important question at St Francis Xavier University, especially with a relatively new administrative team. Collegial governance is more than just consultation; consultation is an important part of collegial governance but collegial governance is a broader concept. It is fundamentally academic staff and administrators governing the institution together (e.g., through the Senate, the University Faculty, and individual faculties, and their committees). Collegial governance also ensures the presence of democratic principles in the decision-making processes of a university. Those being governed (academic staff and, in some cases, non-academic staff and students) have an important say in many of the significant decisions that affect them. This system is unlike those normally found in businesses, governments or non-profits. For instance, where else do the employees get to decide who gets hired and who gets promoted?

Collegial governance is enshrined in the St Francis University Act of 2014 and the University's by laws. Since both academic staff and administrators have the responsibility and rights to govern the university, it is important that both parties work together for the betterment of the

institution. This requires, as a necessary condition, meaningful consultation. Consultation that is perfunctory and cursory only serves to decrease trust and impair the long-term ability of both sides to work together. A system of collegial governance may sometimes not be the most efficient or quickest way to make a decision, but it is designed to lead to better decisions by drawing on the expertise of all parties, and appropriately considering the interests of everyone.

What are the basic principles of collegial governance? The principles of collegial governance are perhaps best expressed by the National Education Association. To paraphrase, academic staff should (i) determine academic standards and processes (curriculum, subject matter, methods of instruction, etc.); (ii) establish the requirements for and authorize the granting of degrees; (iii) control the appointment, reappointment, and tenure of colleagues; and (iv) control the awarding of promotions, sabbaticals, research support, and other rewards or perquisites. In addition to the above, academic staff, through collective bargaining and other governance procedures, should also participate in (i) determining policies and procedures governing compensation; (ii) selecting and evaluating administrators; and (iii) reviewing the institution's budget, making recommendations on financial issues with implications for the academic program, in the short- and long-term.

Why do we use collegial governance in a university?

The reason that we have a collegial governance system is twofold: first, academic staff often are best placed or have the best information for making the decisions (e.g., granting tenure or promotions) and second, and more importantly, to protect academic freedom. Academic freedom provides academic staff with the freedom to teach, discuss, and write about academic matters without censorship, reprisal or other repercussions. Collegial governance, then, provides the processes and structures necessary to protect academic freedom. People outside the university may wonder why administrators (e.g., Deans) do not award promotions or raises. One reason is because it has long been recognized that administrators may have interests that could affect academic freedom. For example, would academic staff feel free to publish research that could upset an administrator if they thought that it might put their promotion in jeopardy? Would faculty be able to fully express their views in Senate if a particular administrator might be opposed to them? To avoid such potential conflicts, one of the primary principles of a system of collegial governance is to allow peers (and not administrators) to control the awarding of “promotions, sabbaticals, research support, and other rewards or perquisites”.

Why do difficulties arise with collegial governance?

Difficulties arise in general because some administrators may not appreciate the fact of collegial governance. This lack of appreciation can arise for several reasons. First, some may think that these principles are just not right, because this has not been their lived experience. No other organization operates in this manner and so

why should a university? Second, some are impatient – they want decisions to be made quickly and for processes to reflect management aims and goals. Both of these views reflect a lack of understanding of the nature and value of collegial governance. Finally, some administrators may have an excessive confidence in their own abilities - they believe that they can make better decisions and make them in a more timely manner (and further offer reassurances they would never use any power received to undermine academic freedom). The lack of appreciation by some administrators of the importance of collegial governance is problematic. Our time (that of both academic staff and administrators) would be better spent dealing with real issues rather than arguing over changes to our collegial governance model. A mature relationship with academic staff would recognize that the system of collegial governance exists because it serves the common good for society and therefore efforts to accomplish particular goals in the university should be made within the context of the collegial governance model.

