

## Whose university is this anyway?

### *Why we need to talk about shared governance*

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Over the past 5 years, the provincial government has slashed Memorial University's core operating grant by a devastating \$39 million. At the same time, demands on faculty and staff have grown steadily, in the form of new or expanded academic programs and intensified administrative work, along with increasing expectations regarding research productivity and public engagement. All the while a number of long-term challenges facing the university – aging buildings, an aging professoriate, and an aging population – impinge on day-to-day operations, slowly eroding our capacity to fulfill our core missions of teaching and research.

In the face of these pressures, the quality of university governance – the institutions, processes and norms that shape how decisions are made at Memorial – is more important than ever. And yet, we observe worrying developments on campus: the shrinking influence of collegial governance structures in shaping academic programs, and the erosion of faculty's capacity to take part in collegial governance in the first place. It's not too late to counteract these trends, but doing so will require a willingness to interrupt what's become business as usual.

#### **Growing top-down academic governance**

If there's one area where faculty might be expected to take a leading role, it is surely in defining the university's scholarly priorities, particularly in the design of academic programs and the appointment of new faculty in them. Actively engaged in teaching and research and protected by the principle of academic freedom, no one is better placed to shape the university in a way that prioritizes the values of knowledge and learning rather than narrowly institutional or political considerations.

Unfortunately, in recent years Memorial has seen growing encroachment by administrators and administrative priorities on decision-making concerning academic matters. The design of academic programming for the proposed new law school, for instance, was presented to the University Senate as a virtual *fait accompli*, having been worked out at the senior administrative level with very little collegial engagement involving the broader university community.

Another case in point is the needlessly secretive search for our new president. Far from being actively involved, most faculty and students are almost completely shut out of the process of selecting the person who will lead our university for up to ten years. We are expected simply to accept the outcome once it is announced.

An especially worrying example is the increasingly top-down approach to defining new appointments in the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences (HSS). Traditionally, that process has been decidedly bottom-up, with departments taking the lead by identifying their needs in light of teaching and research priorities, and more senior decision-makers only intervening to make choices among inevitably competing proposals for new positions. Last year this process was turned on its head, with the Office of the Provost inviting HSS departments to “bid” for one of two positions, the broad intellectual parameters of which were already defined. While the process this year may involve earlier input, ultimately departments will still be asked to tailor their proposals to fit intellectual criteria decided at the top. Moreover, it appears that, as with last year's competition, proposals for new positions must be shared between departments, regardless of whether cross-disciplinary appointments make best sense for scholarly priorities.

### **Erosion of faculty capacity**

Notwithstanding the trend toward top-down governance on campus, and notwithstanding Memorial's status as the only Canadian university to ban academic staff from its governing board, faculty here do retain considerable scope for influencing university decision-making. Faculty councils and the Senate, in particular, possess considerable authority in regards to academic affairs and can be used to set Memorial's intellectual agenda. These formal opportunities matter little, however, when faculty's capacity to engage with them is so stretched as to make meaningful participation very difficult in practice.

An obvious challenge is the shrinkage of the faculty complement across campus. The Voluntary Retirement Program introduced late last year – which saw 31 long-serving faculty leave their units, most of them not replaced – has left numerous units straining to deliver the basic elements of their programs. An increasing share of the teaching on campus, furthermore, is delivered by scholars with contingent appointments that, at least officially, entail no administrative expectations and lack the academic freedom protection of tenure. With faculty struggling to fulfill administrative demands at the unit level, robust participation in faculty- and university-level decision-making is harder to sustain.

The downloading to faculty of administrative work previously handled elsewhere on campus, along with the elimination of dedicated administrative positions in some units, is another obvious aggravating factor. Faculty can hardly be expected to contribute meaningfully to complex questions of university governance when more and more of their time must be devoted to delivering the bare essentials of teaching, research and unit-level administration.

### **What is to be done?**

As the discussion above suggests, the challenges we face are diverse. Some, such as the closed search process for our new president, could be easily remedied and would serve immediately to re-invigorate interest in university governance. Others, such as opening the legislation governing membership on the Board of Regents would take longer, but are clearly feasible in the near term. Still others will require long-term political work in and outside the academy. The erosion of support for well-funded public higher education and the corporatization of universities that together drain faculty capacity for involvement in governance work did not happen overnight and won't be undone in a day.

What is clear is that reimagining our university – taking it back - requires broad involvement across the university community. MUNFA wants to get the conversation going with an upcoming forum on shared decision-making, open to anyone who cares about our shared future. Please join us:

**WHAT:** Town Hall on University Governance  
**WHO:** Julia Wright, President of the Dalhousie Faculty Association  
Bailey Howard, Chairperson of the Canadian Federation of Students-NL  
Hans Rollman, writer, editor and broadcaster based in Canada  
Luke Ashworth, Political Science (moderator)  
**WHEN:** Wednesday, November 13 at 6:30pm  
**WHERE:** A1043 (St. John's)  
AS 375 (Grenfell Campus)