What is shared governance in a university?

Shared governance is not consensus government. Shared governance is not everyone having an equal say or equal voice.

Rather, shared governance is based on a clearly and explicitly established distribution of decision-making responsibilities.

In shared governance, there is transparency. Faculty, staff, students and administrators know which university group has primary responsibility for leading the decision-making process on university matters. Transparency involves, among other things, clarity regarding the primary responsibilities that faculty, staff, students and administrators assume in leading university decision-making. Shared governance intends that all groups have a voice and, at the same time, shared governance involves agreement on which constituency has the primary responsibility for leading a particular decision-making process, where the agreement is clearly articulated and honored.

In shared governance, there is communication. Decisions are not made in a vacuum. The making of a decision occurs with communication to, between, and among all those affected by the decision, all those with an interest in the decision, and all those who should or need to be informed that the decision will be coming up for consideration, that the decision is being considered, and that the decision has been made.

In shared governance, there is trust. Trust can never be mandated, but can be cultivated over time. Trust is initiated by individuals whose motivations are not to give in order to receive, but to give of oneself simply for the common good. Trust in a community is cultivated and sustained not by an individual, but by a critical mass of individuals who strive for trust to become a shared value by persistently treating others in ways that they themselves would like to be treated.

Successful shared governance in a university develops slowly over time, where the process of development is itself guided by shared governance. In its ideal or mature state, shared governance is marked by the institutionalization of the aforementioned (1) distribution of decision-making responsibilities, (2) transparency, (3) communication, and (4) trust. Being institutionalized, these four elements of shared governance do not change merely because of natural turnover in the people participating in shared governance; these elements are not “personality dependent.” Properly institutionalized, they will not disappear simply because an effective leader departs or because an ineffective leader is appointed. In its ideal or mature state, shared governance further develops as needed, but still slowly over time, where the process of further development is itself guided by shared governance.