Applying Hindsight to the Governance Crisis in Upper Iowa University

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Between Fall of 2012 and Summer of 2013, Upper Iowa University experienced a financial deficit of seven million dollars, a change in university presidents, a five-day faculty furlough, a 600-student enrollment decrease, and the elimination of two established majors. These events triggered a governance crisis that caused faculty to fear job displacement and question if shared governance exists in their university. If I was the head of the board of trustees, I would make the following changes to their decisions.

First, I would request a statement from former President, Alan Walker, explaining why, in fall of 2012, he took the unannounced sabbatical then swiftly resigned. This would initiate governance openness. Rather than appointing a new president, I would have conducted the traditional process of interviewing qualified presidential candidates through the formal governance and shared governance structure. By following an established process, the new president would more likely be viewed as being the most qualified candidate rather than being appointed due to the board of trustee’s bias.

I would have met with the heads of the history and sociology department to present the board's idea to increase enrollment through replacing the history and sociology majors with a combined major. The history department expressed concerns regarding focusing on retention rather than enrollment, so it is possible that the department heads were already working towards preventative solutions. Perhaps the department could have redefined pre-requisite requirements to increase overlap so higher-level classes are more accessible. This could allow more students to pursue a double major, thus increasing retention and recruitment. If faculty and departmental heads are included in the decision-making process, shared governance is reinforced and the faculty's trust in the university board's decisions could grow.

In summer of 2013, "the board approved a series of changes to the Faculty Handbook that allowed for the president or board to terminate tenure-track (but not yet tenured) faculty members and to deny tenure to faculty members without giving any reason." (Flaherty, 2019) The faculty of the university did approve these changes but expressed they felt threatened and pressured to give their approval. I would have waited to change the faculty handbook until the new president had gained respect and trust. I would have then clearly communicated the proposed changes, explained the board’s reasoning, and stressed that the faculty could voice their disapproval without negatively affecting their position at the university. Although this would be more time consuming and incur debates between formal governance and faculty, it could have prevented the faculty's feelings of job instability and lack of shared governance.

Reasons of dismissal are vital to faculty on a tenure-track as becoming a tenured professor provides stability, prestige, and academic growth. If an institution chooses to withhold reasons of dismissal, it strips the professor of this stability and opportunity. It also creates an environment that is not conducive to retaining or recruiting faculty with established prestige ultimately damaging the universities' prospects for improvement.

Lisa Guinn, a previously tenure-track professor at Upper Iowa University states, “I had no idea that I could simply be run out for speaking out…that’s my job as a faculty member. I’m guaranteed academic freedom.” (Flaherty, 2019) This statement demonstrates the breech of protection that Guinn felt she was assured by the university. When employees of an institution do not feel supported by governance they can trust, it will affect work performance, employee retention, and eventually institutional reputation. If communication had been improved in the above ways, shared governance could have been maintained and the governance crisis could have been avoided.

References

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