



President's **FOCUS**

Monthly Report to the Board

November 2016

Impacts: Participatory Governance

"Good governance is less about structure and rules than being focused, effective, and accountable."

—*Pearl Zhu, Author*

Every organization has a decision-making process to guide and steer it in achieving its mission. Institutions of higher education in the United States have a board, either appointed or elected, which serves as the governing body with the responsibility of making the most critical decisions about the institution—selecting the chief executive, setting the mission, determining the budget, charting strategic directions, approving major contracts, and more. The chief executive makes the decisions to implement the board's direction and to conduct day-to-day operations. Administrators, department chairs, and managers extend the chief executive's decisions to apply them in each individual office and program across the organization.

In many organizations and companies, that is where decision-making stops. Higher education in the US has a long tradition of involving faculty and staff in the decision-making process. At Montgomery College, our traditions have long included employees, though the specific form has evolved and improved over time, including the use of senates and an Academic Assembly, and today's "participatory governance" system. These structures have provided valuable input, insights, and feedback about College life and decisions that need to be made to realize the mission of the College



and serve students. The important role of College constituencies is expressed in the College's policy on participatory governance, which states that, "effective governance is achieved in the spirit of cooperation, collaboration, civility, respect and collegiality, and involves all levels of the College including students."

In order to ensure that everyone has a voice at the governance table, the College transitioned in 2011 from a model of shared governance to one of participatory governance. The primary motive for this change was to be more inclusive of three groups that didn't previously have representation: bargaining staff, part-time faculty, and students. Under the new model, governance provides a forum for all voices to be heard and key institutional issues to be addressed. By establishing a system for collegial interaction in which faculty, staff, students, and administrators participate in thoughtful deliberation, constituents are active participants in making recommendations to me, and by extension, to the Board of Trustees.

Participatory governance aims to create discursive environments that are open and inclusive, so that all community members can voice their perspectives. This governance system allows people to express their opinions and make recommendations about how the institution should function to fulfill its mission. MC's governance has evolved so that its regular meetings, website, and newsletter are reliable, informative tools designed to keep conversations with leadership active and timely. Now, five years into this evolution, several valuable processes have been firmly established, the communications structure has matured, and community members in different positions at the College routinely turn to the system to suggest change and initiate discussions.

Implementation

The College's participatory governance system was established after a Blue Ribbon Taskforce established in 2011 conducted a broad collegewide conversation about the aims and role of governance. The taskforce researched best practices and successful models at other institutions as it explored several models for participatory governance. The taskforce, for example, was careful to establish the parameters of governance to ensure its role was distinct from the College's bargaining units and from the College's management responsibilities. It clarified that College processes that involve contractual, governmental, or legal requirements do not fall under participatory governance review. Examples of this include collective bargaining, legal rights, as well as federal, state, or local governmental mandates.



The role of participatory governance at the College is to inform, advise, and make recommendations to management. The governance councils do not implement or manage College work, but identify and clarify needs and interests of constituents. They also recommend the direction of solutions. The participation of governance in this process has several impacts: it improves the quality of decision-making since the decisions are made with input from diverse councils—detailed below—representing the perspectives of a variety of College stakeholders. Decisions can also be based on more thorough information since the councils are well-connected to wider constituencies and can conduct surveys, listening sessions, and meetings to gather data or feedback on existing policies or potential changes. Finally, the recommendations made by the councils are the result of extensive dialogue. As anyone who has served on a committee knows, the best recommendations usually emerge when an idea has been thoroughly explored through discussions and the strongest logic has been identified.

Structure

The MC governance system is built on three broad council areas: four councils representing constituent groups (students, staff, faculty, administrators); four councils representing functional areas (services for students, employees, operations, and academics), and four councils representing campuses (Germantown, Rockville, Takoma Park/Silver Spring and WD&CE). Each council communicates with the College Council. Representatives from each of these groups are elected by their constituencies once a year and serve for a duration of one year. The councils meet either once or twice a month, to discuss matters of policy, oversight, operations, and strategy. Topics are brought to the councils through constituents, who can attend the open comments period at the beginning of any council meeting and speak before the council or contact one of their representative council members about an issue they would like raised. Topics can also be introduced by College administrators as well as College Council leaders who often solicit feedback or recommendations on significant initiatives and decisions. Once an issue has been explored and voted on, recommendations are made to me. I review them thoroughly and then announce my decision to assign the recommendation to the appropriate office or to address the issue differently than recommended and explain why. I meet regularly with the College Council Chair to discuss recommendations that have been made by governance councils or from the College Council. The



College Council also provides the councils with information about the disposition of their recommendations.

Contributions of Governance

Each year the governance councils address multiple requests for review, feedback, and recommendations. For example, in FY16 the councils provided detailed feedback on the Middle States Self-Study design and on the *Montgomery College 2020* strategic plan, both important processes that will impact the College's planning and accreditation for many years to come. Governance also provided feedback this year on the policy regarding minors on campus and was engaged with the creation of an Academic Master Plan.

Governance can also initiate changes in policies, procedures, or practices. For example, the creation of the shuttle bus service was the result of council work, and this year it successfully expanded the hours of the campus shuttle to better accommodate student schedules. Governance also initiated a modification to policy on Employee Privileges, approved by the Board, which protects employees who participate in governance from retaliation. Discussions around health — banning e-cigarettes, for example— and safety on campus—making active shooter trainings available to fit student schedules—have also been initiated by participatory governance this year. Currently a project is underway to develop a web page that provides a comprehensive list of services and resources available to students throughout the College. This was at the request of the Student Council, which sought to increase student awareness and use of these resources. Such practical, student-centered solutions are one of the strengths of governance.

Communication

One of the accomplishments most lauded by those involved in governance has been the improvement of communication. Where previously there were gaps between important structures in the institution, the new governance model has provided a structure to reduce such failures. An administrator who wants to examine how different constituent groups feel about a specific topic has access to a network of councils through which he/she can explore it. In the same way, each council is plugged into mechanisms for communicating with other councils and with administrators about their concerns. What was formerly a collection of silos has grown into a single network with frequent interaction and transfer of information and messages. This dynamic has increased the climate of inclusiveness and equity at the College.



The governance website and the *Connections Newsletter* are two more valuable tools of communication. Both are products of the new governance design and the ambitious leadership that has developed from within the councils. As we strive to maximize effective communication with the councils, my administration is working to relay back to the councils and constituents more clearly what is done with the information and opinions that are provided. We appreciate that a good deal of time and energy are put such feedback and closing the loop on these processes more thoroughly may fine tune the councils' ability to provide targeted recommendations in the future.

Future of Governance

The College's participatory governance system is one of the most valuable processes we have as an institution for ensuring open dialogue, informed decisions, and a climate of productive participation. The issues raised are given thoughtful, informed consideration by the people most impacted by them. The success of governance at attracting talented community members to their ranks and creating smooth, effective processes for communication and information has impressed me greatly. I am pleased that it has also given more employees and students the chance to take on leadership roles and to increase their understanding of College operations. In the coming years, I hope to see governance increasingly focused on strengthening initiatives that drive student success. As our system continues to evolve, I believe that energy can be increasingly directed at how employees' work can improve student outcomes and how administration can better support employees in those efforts.

Questions for Discussion:

1. What developments in the participatory governance system stand out to you?
2. Are there strengths to the College's governance system that were not highlighted in this report?
3. How does the governance system impact the foundations for student success?

