Sunshine Dialogue II

Karen E. Markoe and Joseph G. Flynn

Karen Markoe:
Allow me to introduce ourselves and tell you what we do. We are both faculty members at colleges of the State University of New York, the largest university in the United States with 64 campuses, and 19,000 faculty and professional staff serving more than 400,000 students. Professor Flynn and I both served two two-year terms as President of the SUNY-wide Faculty Senate. That is, we were both governance practitioners, so most of the ideas that we have on the subject grow out of our experiences.

As Professor Flynn’s presidency was ending and mine was beginning, we created the National Network of Faculty Senates under the auspices of the American Association for Higher Education, an organization familiar to some of you. The idea of the National Network grew out of an experience that Professor Flynn had as President of the University Faculty Senate. The University was about to select a new chancellor, its chief administrative officer, and the Board of Trustees neglected to include any faculty members on the search committee. The Senate formally protested this omission. We knew from our informal associations with faculty in other parts of the country that it was usual to include faculty leaders in searches of this magnitude. So we staged an academic forum and invited faculty leaders from comparable universities to explain their practices. We also invited representatives from the Board of Trustees to the forum. All who appeared were impressed with what they learned that day, and Professor Flynn was invited to serve on the search committee. (Once again the State University of New York is selecting a chancellor; now faculty are on the search committee without question.)

Not only did the Trustees learn from this experience; so did we. For one, we learned that it was valuable to meet with other governance leaders from other states and regions and to share ideas and experiences. Since 1987, as part of the annual higher education conference of the American Association for Higher Education, the National Network of Faculty Senates has sponsored leadership workshops for faculty governance leaders.

During the past seven years we have been invited to colleges and universities that are trying to improve their governance systems. It became apparent that because each institution is different, each governance structure has to grow out of the unique culture of that particular campus. We could facilitate change, but we could not impose our ideas.

Joe Flynn:
Karen, your reference to the academic forum we staged in Saratoga Springs, NY in 1986 while you were Vice-President is a logical starting point for this dialogue. I still vividly recall, not only the
dramatic challenges we faced, but the convictions
which we brought to those events. The first is the
idea of selecting a method for our protest which
would resonate the deep culture of the university.
In selecting an academic forum, we chose a
perfectly natural thing for faculty to do. We
framed the issue and invited all parties to discuss
it openly and on the record.

The second idea, one which we adopted during
that rather tense period, was to try to think and
act imaginatively and to argue from principles
rather than from a presumption of position or
power. We agreed that if we were to be suasive
with the Board, we would have to argue from
values and ideas historically endorsed by both
our Senate and the Trustees. It also was important
that a partial precedent had been established by
my involvement in searches for system Provost
and Executive Vice Chancellor, incremental
change having a higher potential for success.
What emerged was not only the immediate
change we sought, but a verbatim narrative re-
cord of 30 years of SUNY Chancellor searches
as well as practices at other university systems.

When we talk about collegiality in governance
we are not referring to etiquette in the groves of
academe. We are talking about systematic ways
of doing business, initially non-adversarial, occa-
sionally controversial, formal, thorough and re-
ponsible policy formulation. We are seeking to
create parties who truly respect one another, not
merely polite exchanges between hierarchically
arrayed superiors and subordinates.

What are the Essential Factors Internal to
the University that Call for Greater
Academic Participation In Governance?

Joe Flynn:

Let’s take a look at the changes that have taken
place among the people who teach, work and
study in the university. Today I see a set of
internal demographics radically different from
30 years ago and substantially different from
even ten years ago. Not only is the student body
more diverse but it seems to have got itself up
into a motley of caucuses bent solely on self-per-
petuation. Students qua students seldom seem to
rally around a common cause; the dynamics of
these groups is centripetal, driving the university
away from any coherent central purposes. Inter-
estingly, this small group self-absorption mimics
those situations where the faculty allegiance is
primarily to their department and economic self-
interest.

What are the Principal External Factors that
Call for Greater Academic Participation In
Governance?

Karen Markoe:

In the post-communist world, we are faced with
an array of issues that the Cold War to some
degree kept in check: destructive nationalism,
racism, anti-semitism and religious fanatism
among them. If solutions are to be found, argu-
ably universities offer the best hope—in reasoned
debate, in technological improvements that will
help the world economy, and in educating the
next generation to make them responsible citi-
zens wary of destructive teachings. In other
words, colleges are critical and they cannot afford
to be second rate. Their curricula need to be kept
up to date; their laboratories and libraries must
be ready for the tasks at hand; their faculties must
be talented and capable of renewal. Governance,
the change mechanism of the university, must
function humanely and efficiently.

Recently at some American colleges, racist and
anti-semitic speakers have been brought to cam-
pus by student groups, with distressing conse-
quences. It appeared that governance
organizations had abdicated their responsibilities
to balance the right of freedom of speech guar-
anteed by the United States Constitution with the
responsibility to create an atmosphere for rea-
soned debate and genuine dialogue. If universi-
ties are to be up to the task of leadership, it
behoves us ‘to get it right’ by using the structures
of governance to establish a community of reason
and tolerance among students, faculty and ad-
ministrators.

Joe Flynn:

Well, we certainly seem today to be much more
susceptible to external pressures than we were in