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The Budget Crisis in Academia: Does it Ignore Faculty Voices?

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Abstract

Due to the recent financial difficulties, postsecondary institutions are experiencing a trickle-down effect of these problems and find itself in the midst of an ongoing debate regarding funding allocation. In negotiating necessary changes to address the budget shortfalls, the questions to consider are 1) How and if faculty are affected by budget decisions and 2) What is the impact of faculty governance on academic freedom? The purpose of this exploratory study is to measure the perception of faculty at one institution regarding how or if budget shortfalls impacted shared governance and academic freedom, in addition to possibly stifling or eliminating faculty voices in the decision-making process. Specifically, the research provides a brief definition of shared governance and its effect on academic freedom, the influence of scarce resources on budget decisions, and the importance of actively listening and respecting faculty and student voices in the budget process. A survey administered to faculty at Midwest University yielded a 31% response rate. Recommendations for university leadership and decision-makers are offered.

Keywords: Budget crisis; Academic freedom; Shared governance; Faculty voice.

1. Introduction

Due to the recent international and national financial challenges, higher education is experiencing a trickle-down effect of financial problems and finds itself in the midst of an ongoing debate regarding funding allocation. University budgets are limited, students and parents question whether college is worth the cost, and politicians question the direction of higher education (Anft, 2018). Many problems experienced by public higher education institutions are decreased enrollment and reduced state funding, which results in a budget crisis in academia. (Capaldi, 2011) argued “When state funding is cut, the core enterprise, education, is cut” ... and “outsid[ers] do not realize how much damage these cuts are causing” (§ 3). Institutions are being asked to do more with less state funding, while increasing accountability of undertakings on campus. In negotiating necessary changes to address the budget shortfalls, students and faculty are losing their voices. As a result, faculty members are losing academic freedom and shared governance. The purpose of this exploratory study is to measure the perception of faculty regarding if and how the budget crisis stifled or eliminated their voices in the decision-making process using a survey completed by faculty at Midwest University in the United States.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Shared Governance and Academic Freedom in a Budget Crisis

The faculty role is deteriorating in higher education in the era of budget crisis. Faculty are frustrated with their limited role in governing at their institution, lack of support from administrators, and overall university bureaucracy (Anft, 2018). Ginsberg (2011) contended that university leaders with little to no academic training have custody of institutions; consequently, faculty's role in governance and their academic freedom are diminished. Historically, higher education institutions have valued their faculty and reputation, but university leaders have transformed it to something unrecognizable (Ginsberg, 2011). According to American Federation of Teachers AFT (2006), administrators and boards of trustees, in the past, protected and recognized the rights and voices of faculty and staff. Now these officials see the college president as CEO like in a business sector, no longer as an academic leader (American Federation of Teachers AFT, 2006). More and more higher education institutions are hiring outside of the institution and employ the corporate model to run these institutions and no longer fill these positions with faculty (Anft, 2018). The AFT argued that the business model threatened the integrity of the key educational and research functions that faculty and staff perform (American Federation of Teachers AFT, 2006). Faculty and university leaders are not always in complete agreement on how to govern the university. Faculty desire quality programs but university leaders prefer efficiency and expediency (Archibald and Conley, 2011), with more and more adjunct faculty being hired to teach courses instead of tenured or tenured-track faculty.

2.2. Shared Governance

Shared governance is a way to generate agreement between faculty and university leaders in governing the university. Shared governance is defined as faculty participation in the governance and academic freedom in such

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areas as budgetary and salary matters, financial exigency, and administrator selection and retention ([American Association of University Professors AAUP, n.d.](#)) [Olson \(2009\)](#) defined shared governance as a complex and delicate balance between faculty participation in the planning and decision-making of institutional issues and administrative accountability. Additionally, [American Federation of Teachers AFT \(2006\)](#) defined shared governance as

the set of practices under which college faculty and staff participate in significant decisions concerning the operation of their institutions. Colleges and universities are very special types of institutions with a unique mission—the creation and dissemination of ideas. For that reason, they have created particular arrangements to serve that mission best. (p. 4)

Shared governance matters because it is the means to the end, according to [De Ferranti \(2009\)](#), but the means do not justify the end result when shared governance or the faculty voice is absent from the decision-making process.

One problem with shared governance is that its meaning varies for university leaders, faculty, and even students involved in the decision-making process. Effective and responsive shared governance is vital in the midst of attempting to resolve budget problems in higher education ([Bahls, 2014](#)). Sometimes students are harmed by the university leaders' decisions associated with the budget crisis, especially when faculty input is limited. One example of this was documented at Miami-Dade College when the institution dismissed over 200 workers leaving 30,000 students with the inability to enroll in required classes to graduate ([Blumenstyk, 2009](#)).

Other decisions by university leaders based on the budget crisis have altered or dismantled programs without faculty input in the decision. Some program modifications are under the pretext of being necessary to address the budget crisis but faculty and programs managed by fractious personnel are targeted. Moreover, discontinuing programs can be perceived by faculty as legal methods to eradicate the institution of undesirable faculty protected by tenure ([American Association of University Professors AAUP, n.d.](#)).

The perceived participation in shared governance increases faculty job satisfaction ([Oroz, 2014](#)) and university leaders should not feel that they are giving up power or control in the process. On occasion, faculty feel they do not have a voice in the budget process, but university leaders feel they are inclusive of faculty at every stage ([Archibald and Conley, 2011](#)). In a survey conducted by [Anft \(2018\)](#) the findings revealed that few faculty agreed or strongly agreed that "Shared governance at my college is healthy" (p. 13).

Faculty are committed to teaching, research and service, but are also individuals who exercise an independent voice grounded in expertise and commitments ([Rhoades, 2010](#)) and their voice should be listened to and respected. Moreover, Rhoades argues that faculty expect to have a voice in the future of their institution, but not just a voice, a meaningful voice.

2.3. Scarce Resources and University Leadership in Budget Crisis

The faculty voice is weakened or disregarded, but it is particularly evident during the time of a budget crisis. Additionally, because of scarce resources, the faculty voice is diminished ([Rhoades, 2010](#)), under attack ([Daniel, 2014](#)), and sometimes not respected by university leaders. [Redmond \(2007\)](#), argues that trust and honesty between faculty and university leaders are important but a challenge when related to shared governance in such areas as budget issues.

Scarce resources at any institution increases politics and decreases collegiality, confidence, and respect, and have the appearance of inequity. [Dijk and De Cremer \(2006\)](#), claim university leaders tend to allocate resources that are self-benefiting. Having ineffective leadership intensifies infighting for these scarce resources. Discriminatory practices are also evident especially if leadership does not favor a faculty's academic freedom and/or an academic program. Due process is not practiced during these turmoil times because financial exigency is the justification in the mind of the university leaders to adjudicate decisions without faculty input.

The leadership style of university leaders is sometimes the reason for conflict related to shared governance. A faculty member's professional expertise in scholarship and teaching entitles them to participate in college and university governance ([Gerber, 2015](#)). There are some university leaders who welcome faculty input since they are the experts in courses and programs and they welcome shared governance to resolve issues and to preserve the respect of faculty. Yet, other leaders employ the budget turmoil as an opportunity to manipulate situations to their benefit ([Gerber, 2015](#)).

Continuous budget cuts affect faculty morale because it adjusts salaries, forces early retirement, and endorses furloughs amongst other money-saving measures ([Faculty Morale, 2010](#)). Additionally, low faculty morale can produce long-term damage if budget cuts are not handled with faculty input and shared governance. University leaders should be alarmed because it is problematic for faculty to reestablish trust and faith in leadership once it is lost. Therefore, university leaders cannot afford to be indifferent to faculty views and concerns. Institutional climate and culture are invaluable to all constituents and changing a negative perception is challenging, both long and short-term ([Gerber, 2015](#)).

2.4. Students' Voices

Research related to whether or not students are permitted at the table when communicating about budget crisis issues is very limited. It is not evident that administrators allow students or student leadership at the table when attempting to inform or communicate issues related to budget crisis.

The responsibility of state universities is to serve the state's citizens and to meet their educational needs, and students are their citizens. Giving voice to students empowers them and provides them with the concept of value. University leaders cannot afford to ignore the student voice because students are effectively protesting and

demanding to ensure their voices are heard. The students' voice in this paper is related to their rights to be involved in the process of program changes, especially when dismantling programs. Cook-Sather (2006) contends that the student voice is having a legitimate perspective and opinion, and having an active role in the decision-making process (p. 361) about the direction of the institution.

Sometimes it is difficult to get the student's perspective on budgetary issues or programming because they do not have a long-term investment in the institution and most institutions are slow moving, complex, and controversial (Wadhvani and Green, 2013). But yet, it does not mean that students should not have an active role in decision making. Disregarding students on these issues is an indictment against state institutions. Budget cuts forces students to make significant adjustment and life changing modifications such as change majors or switch schools (CNNMoney, 2011). These changes usually cost students financially and beyond tuition and fees such as time and delayed career.

Faculty and university leaders are not always well-informed about student issues and therefore they should not be a spokesperson on student's behalf because students bring a unique perspective to the conversation. The institution should be committed to the "participation, transformation and empowerment" (Seale, 2010) of the student in every aspect of the decision-making process. Our colleges and universities exist to serve and listen to its citizens in the state, who have a vested interest in the institution.

3. Methodology

The purpose of this research was to examine if and how the budget shortfall influenced shared governance and academic freedom. Specifically, the researchers raised the question, "Did the budget crisis stifle or eliminate faculty and students' voices in the decision-making process?" This exploratory study measured if there was a statistical significant difference in the way men and women and tenure track and tenured faculty disagreed or agreed to the survey questions.

3.1. Survey Instrument

The survey was developed based on a literature review on shared governance and faculty involvement. Email addresses were obtained from Midwest Office of Records after the IRB is approved. A survey was sent to tenured and tenured-track faculty in the College of Education and the College of Arts and Sciences at Midwest University. The survey was emailed to faculty via Qualtrics online survey software. The role of the subjects in this exploratory study was to complete the online survey, which took approximately 7 to 10 minutes. There were five demographic items and 15 survey items in the survey. The subjects responded to each survey item that best describes their opinion about each statement using the four-point Likert scale, 1 for 'strongly disagree' and 4 for 'strongly agree'

For this exploratory study, there are a couple of limitations that should be considered when interpreting this exploratory study. The fact that the survey was 1) administered at one institution, Midwest University, and 2) the sample size is small, $n=65$. Therefore, one must be careful in generalizing the findings of this study. Additionally, since the χ^2 tests were not significant, just p -values were provided in the tables.

Data was retrieved from Qualtrics and analyzed with SPSS Version 24. The response rate was 31%. Faculty at Midwest University were asked for four demographic questions (gender, tenure status, race/ethnicity, and length of employment. Additionally, 15 questions were asked and are provided in Table 2. Likert scales used in this survey for possible responses to the 15 questions were strongly disagree, disagree, agree, and strongly agree.

4. Results

All survey respondents were faculty employed at Midwest University from two colleges, College of Arts and Sciences and Education. There were more males (57%) who responded to the survey than females (43%), the majority of the respondents were White (89%), and approximately 59% who stated their length of employment at 15 years or less. Of the 15 questions asked, respondents stated they disagreed with 5 questions, agreed with 9 questions, and one question had an even percentage responded. The 5 questions respondents disagreed with were 1) Midwest leaders seek input from faculty (53%); 2) Midwest leaders seek input from staff (71%); 3) Midwest leaders encourage shared governance among faculty, staff, and students (67%); 4) faculty input is valued and regarded when deciding program changes (63%); 5) faculty input is valued by Midwest leadership when making policy changes (64%). On the other hand, respondents agreed with the following 9 questions, 1) faculty workload has increased (96%); 2) the quality of students' education has diminished because of budgetary decisions (81%); 3) Midwest faculty voice has been stifled or disregarded in the budgetary decision-making process (62%); 4) course schedules have become less flexible in meeting the needs of students (61%); 5) Midwest student's voice has been stifled and disregarded in the budgetary decision (64%); 6) it is challenging for faculty to re-establish truth and faith when shared governance is not practiced (88%); 7) students should have a voice when changes are being made to academic programs; 8) the student voice should be considered prior to dismantling academic programs (81%); 9) an exclusive campus climate is essential for establishing shared governance (96%). The one question, academic freedom in teaching and research has not been influenced by the budget crisis, revealed that 51% of the respondents disagreed and 49% agreed with that question (see Table 2).

A χ^2 test of independence was conducted on each of the 15 questions by gender and then by tenure status to determine if there were statistical significant differences. The statistical significance level for the χ^2 tests were at $p < 0.05$. Some of the cells had an observed and expected count less than 5 because of the small sample size. One must be careful in interpreting results when cells have a value less than 5. When the χ^2 count values were less than 5, the Likelihood Ratio was reported since χ^2 assumptions were violated. The results revealed there were no differences in

the whether faculty agreed or disagreed with the questions asked. Specifically, there were no statistical significant difference between males and females or tenure track and tenured faculty in responding to the 15 questions (see Table 2).

5. Conclusions and Recommendations

The purpose of this manuscript was to examine if and how the budget shortfall impacted shared governance and academic freedom, and to determine faculty perceptions in whether their voices were stifled or eliminated in the decision-making process during a budget crisis. Specifically, these survey questions were asked of Midwest faculty in this study and approximately 2/3 agreed with this question. Therefore, the answer is “yes.” It is not surprising that hard economic times heighten campus discourse and sense of control over programs.

Another survey question to consider for this study was whether the budget crisis ignores shared governance as well as faculty and students’ voices. The results revealed that Midwest leaders did not encourage shared governance in the decision-making process. But, in responding to this question, one must take into consideration the leader, his/her leadership style, or the leader’s views on the importance of the faculty and students voices. Consequently, the answer could possibly be “yes” or “no.” There are several ways to define the leadership styles of administrators such as the transformational leader or autocratic leader. The leadership style that works best in this type of situation is the participatory leader. The participatory leader are interested in the respect and engagement of others and are more likely to get all constituents involved before making final decisions about the budget and programs. Therefore, for the participatory leader, the answer to this research question is “yes.”

Overall, the findings of this exploratory study revealed that there are no associations between the gender of respondents or tenure status of the respondents as it relates to the questions asked in this study. It was not surprising to see there were no statistical differences by gender, but yet surprising not to see any statistical differences by tenure status. Untenured faculty sometimes lack awareness of campus issues, are less likely to be vocal about campus related issues, and tend to focus on their research and teaching. On the other hand, tenured faculty tend to be vocal and confident about making their voices heard about campus related issues.

There were two survey questions 1) faculty input is valued and regarded when deciding program changes during the budget crisis and 2) faculty input is valued by Midwest leadership when making policy changes during the budget crisis had χ^2 values by gender of .079 and .097, respectively (see Table 2). There is a possibility that these questions could have been significant if the sample size was larger and should be investigated further.

Here are a few recommendations university leaders should consider when making decisions about budgets and academic programs and how they should hear and acknowledge all voices at the table:

1. The institution should focus on its role in the state and who they are as an institution in the state. The primary institutional goal is to educate and to serve its citizens and this should always be considered in decision making.
2. Effective university leaders in the time of budget crisis are necessary and beneficial. Open, engaged, civil, and frequent communication with faculty and students could lead to positive outcomes if the leader has “transparency, accountability, and shared governance” (De Ferranti, 2009).
3. It is important that faculty and even students feel empowered by the institution.
4. Actively engage students in the decision-making process by offering focus groups before changing or dismantling programs. It is the marketplace or citizens that determine the direction and needs of higher education institutions (Eckel and King, 2004).
5. Faculty should be made to feel they have an investment at the institution they work. University leaders should listen carefully to their voices. Faculty should have the final say about programs and program cuts and their input should be implemented and respected.
6. It could be beneficial to university leaders to educate faculty and students on operational and budget sides of colleges (Woodhouse, 2015).
7. Faculty and university leaders should have open and honest communication because the opinions and viewpoints of faculty may provide information and strategies not previously considered by university leaders (Archibald and Conley, 2011).
8. Universities should evaluate the prevalence of adjunct faculty (who tend to be women and people of color) and the ways in which they are being used to teach more and more courses; there is parallel between more adjuncts and the reduction of shared governance.
9. “If we [faculty] do not exercise our voice, we lose it, and in the process, society loses” (Rhoades, 2010). It is important for institutions to protect the faculty voice (an AAUP initiative) and the student voice.

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Table-1. Frequency and Percentage of Variables (n=65)

Variable	Frequency	Percentage
Gender		
Male	35	56.5
Female	27	43.5
Tenure status		
Tenure-track	13	20.6
Tenure	50	79.4
Race/Ethnicity		
White	55	88.7
Other race/ethnicity	7	11.33
Length of employment		
<= 7 year	13	25.5
8-15 year	17	33.3
16-25 year	10	19.6
25+ year	11	21.6

Table-2. Frequencies, Percentage, and χ^2 p-values by Gender and Tenure Status

Variable	Frequency	Percentage	χ^2 p-value	
			Gender	Tunure ^a
Midwest leaders seek input from faculty when making budgetary decisions during the crisis				
Disagree	28	52.8	.236	.275
Agree	25	47.2		
Midwest leaders seek input from staff when making budgetary decisions during the crisis				
Disagree	34	70.8	.966	.271
Agree	14	29.2		
Faculty workload has increased due to the budget crisis				
Disagree	2	3.7	.804	.441
Agree	52	96.3		
The quality of students education has diminished because of budgetary decisions made by Midwest leaders during the crisis				
Disagree	10	19.2	.527	.563
Agree	42	80.8		
Midwest leaders encourage shared governance among faculty, staff and students when making budgetary decisions during the crisis				
Disagree	34	66.7	.196	.629
Agree	17	33.3		

^aTenure represents the tenure status of respondents. Possible responses were tenure track or tenured.

Table-3. cont

Variable	Frequency	Percentage	χ^2 p-value	
			Gender	Tunure
Midwest's faculty voice gas been stifled or disregarded in the budgetary decision-making process				
Disagree	20	38.5	.891	.795
Agree	32	61.5		
Course schedules gave become less flexible in meeting the needs of students because of budgetary decisions made by Midwest leaders				
Disagree	21	39.6	.790	.239
Agree	32	60.4		
Midwest's student's voice gas been stifled and disregarded in the budgetary decision-making process				
Disagree	17	36.2	.869	.813
Agree	30	63.8		
Faculty input is valued and regarded when deciding program changes during the budget crisis				
Disagree	32	62.7	.079	.748
Agree	19	37.3		
My academic freedom in teaching and research has not been influenced by the budget crisis				
Disagree	27	50.9	.262	.215
Agree	26	49.1		

Table-4. cont

Variable	Frequency	Percentage	χ^2 p-value	
			Gender	Tunure
Faculty input is valued by Midwest leadership when making policy changes during the budget crisis				
Disagree	33	63.5	.097	.793
Agree	19	36.5		
It is challenging for faculty to re-establish truth and faith in Midwest's leadership when shared governance is not practiced				
Disagree	6	12.0	.789	.568
Agree	44	88.0		
Students should gave a voice when changes are being made to academic programs during the budget crisis				
Disagree	6	11.8	.192	.148
Agree	45	88.2		
The student voice should be considered prior to dismantling academic programs				

Disagree	10	19.6	.197	.261
Agree	41	80.4		
An inclusive campus climate is essential for establishing shared governance during the budget crisis				
Disagree	2	3.9	.390	.424
Agree	49	96.1		