SHAPING A SYSTEM OF SHARED GOVERNANCE

Comments to the University Senate, October 4, 2012
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No fanfare greeted the establishment of the University Senate in 1912. The record is, in fact, quite spare with not even a comment in the Minnesota Daily, although brief mention is made in the minutes of the Board of Regents and the annual report of President George Vincent for that year. Creation of the Senate seems to have been a quiet and collaborative process. It was all very Minnesotan.

So, what the forces did bring the Senate into existence, making it one of the earliest such active governance institutions? This centennial offers an opportunity to revisit the relevant factors and to acknowledge the strength of an institution that has survived for a century and is still high functioning.

A centennial requires, I think, an investigation of origins and so this brief presentation will suggest the circumstances that established here at the University of Minnesota a body with the venerable name of Senate. I will highlight some historical circumstances that defined college and university governance, discuss the challenges that faced ambitious research universities in the early twentieth century, and then identify the immediate goals of founders who anticipated that the Senate would be an effective way to build a stronger and more unified campus.

Early universities depended on an informal compact between scholars and students. In the ancient world and during the Middle Ages they together established sites to create and disseminate knowledge. As institutions formalized, their patrons were the church, a city, or even private individuals who built facilities for lectures and libraries for study, and the education of students remained a principle reason for their growth and success.

When North American colonists in Massachusetts established Harvard College in 1636, just sixteen years after settlement, authority was held by a Board of Overseers comprised of political leaders, magistrates, and clergy. A new college charter in 1650 established a framework that included a Corporation comprised of the president and faculty, but the charter made this Corporation subordinate to the Overseers who retained ownership of all property. Historian Jurgen Herbst suggests that this was a compromise between a medieval tradition of corporate autonomy and emerging political and legal authority in education.\(^1\) Subsequently both private and public colleges established in the new Republic were granted charters that left authority with governing boards and the presidents they appointed; faculties were typically weak. The Morrill Land Grant Act of 1862 did not change this model, but added a layer of state legislators (and governors) who viewed the new institutions as their responsibility. The dominant pattern of governance was a powerful board, a president with whatever authority he (inevitably he) could

derive from the board and good relations with his faculty, and a faculty dependent on the good will of both.

By the late nineteenth century significant changes forced a reconsideration of the model. The emergence of research universities with faculty members holding PhDs began to elevate the status of academe. Ambitious specialists organized their disciplines through departments and used these to gain more control over hiring and curriculum. Many had advanced degrees from Germany and had adopted the ideals regarding freedom in teaching and freedom in learning.

Another factor was the rapid expansion of higher education in terms of student enrollments, budgets, and professional schools of law and medicine; these, in turn, required administrative staff to organize admissions, run the library, and manage physical facilities. This growth was exciting but somewhat chaotic. Internal governance was challenged by centripetal forces that strained institutional coherence.

Yet another factor was the shift away from more genteel governing boards to those headed by powerful political and economic figures. Perhaps inevitably, some butted heads with self-confident young faculty members, many of whom were shaping the new social sciences. At Wisconsin, an effort was made in 1894 to remove economist Richard Ely for his criticism of capitalism, but he was exonerated. A few years later, a radical Populist legislature turned out the entire faculty at Kansas State Agricultural College, rehiring some but not all the faculty -- only to have their action reversed when political influence shifted three years later. Even without a *Chronicle of Higher Education*, information of these and other clashes circulated across the country. Such political interference led faculty to create the American Association of University Professors (AAUP); its first committee, Committee A, established in 1915, was the Committee on Academic Freedom, which asserted:

The term “academic freedom” has traditionally had two applications—to the freedom of the teacher and to that of the student, *Lerhfreiheit* and *Lernfreiheit*… Academic freedom [for teachers] in this sense comprises three elements: freedom of inquiry and research; freedom of teaching within the university or college; and freedom of extramural utterance and action.

Serving on the fifteen-member committee that wrote this initial Declaration on Academic Freedom was Guy Stanton Ford, professor of history at the University of Minnesota.

The University of Minnesota does not seem to have been directly confronted with such issues at the turn of the century (but it would be later and not always to its credit; for some commentary you might read a short essay academic freedom on this campus by Hy Berman on our Centennial webpage).

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The University of Minnesota was growing rapidly, from just over 200 students in 1870 to about 3,500 in 1912. Alongside undergraduate expansion, it advanced research ambitions by giving its first Ph.D. in 1888. The administration grew apace with an array of deans for eight professional schools and one specifically for women. Ambitious plans were underway to upgrade physical site of the campus.

But what about governance? Under long-serving President Cyrus Northrup, the University of Minnesota established a university Council in 1905. Senate secretary Gary Engstrand has found little record of activity and within less than a decade after this apparently ineffectual Council had been named, a new and different organization, a Senate, was created.

University historian Ann Pflaum points out that George E. Vincent, a relatively young president just 47 years old, came with the ambition to significantly modernize the university. The new appointee came in 1911 with strong credentials from the University of Chicago where he had been Dean of Arts, Literature and Science under innovative President William Rainey Harper. This decade was marked by a generational shift was evident both in the presidency and in the growing number of younger faculty as the founding generation retired and the university expanded. Vincent would appoint five new deans in his six-year term as president. He clearly recognized the importance of engaging his specialized and confident faculty. While the Senate at Chicago consisted of Harper and heads of departments, the Minnesota Senate was composed of all full and associate professors plus the president.5

The challenge facing the Senate was, as one observer put it, to pull "a loose federation of disparate colleges into a self-conscious, cooperating and purposeful institution of higher learning."6 The enabling language of the Board of Regents in May of 2012 is significant: The constitution recognizes the autonomy of the various colleges and schools of the University and at the same time establishes a central body to which are entrusted the interests and welfare of the University as a whole. The Senate is not made up of representatives of the various colleges but includes all teachers of the rank of Professor and Associate Professor throughout the institution.7 President Vincent echoed this sentiment in his annual report, "it is to be hoped that University unity will be furthered by this new organization without encroachment upon the necessary autonomy of the various subdivisions of the institution."8 Importantly, Vincent also encouraged the establishment of an all-Student Council.

When the Senate held its first meeting in Nicholson Hall on October 3, 1912, there was, as I said at the outset, very little fanfare. No mention was made of the issues of academic freedom. But, significantly, by 1916 the university had an AAUP chapter. From the outset the new Senate took up serious and at times less serious business, debating a quarter system.

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6 Gray, University of Minnesota, p. 148.
7 University of Minnesota Board of Regents for Fiscal Years ending 1911, 1912, Bulletin 16 1 (1913): 33.
8 University of Minnesota President’s Report for 2012-13, Bulletin 17 (1914):11.
calendar, reflecting on admissions policies, and officially adopting simplified spelling for words like catalog, gram, and color.

Today, one hundred years (and one day) after its inauguration, the Senate remains the place where, sometimes in the background, and occasionally front and center, the freedom to teach and freedom to learn are defended. It also stands as a symbol of our intention to remain a truly unified university even as we respect the diversity of our campuses, our colleges for liberal arts and for professional training, and our increasingly and wonderfully heterogeneous group of students, staff, and faculty. About a thousand people, including all of you, and including you, President Kahler, who serve in governance on this campus, affirm these values as we celebrate our Senate’s 100th Anniversary. We have built a strong voice for the University.

Before handing this event back to our moderator I want to thank several people. Vickie Courtney and Becky Hippert of the Senate office have been developed a web page to provide continuing new information about the centennial. Ann Pflaum, the university historian, is helping create a timeline of Senate history. Gary Engstrand has read through decades of Senate meetings to reveal that, much as things change, some fundamental issues require persistent renegotiation. Working closely with our Centennial Committee, Professor Marti Hope Gonzales has been a wonderful leader. Marti’s sense of humor, her infectious enthusiasm, and her commitment to advancing important conversations through these events have brought us our panels today. So, I leave it to her to lead us forward now.