

Introduction to University: Lecture Eleven

University Governance

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Professors and students thinking hard about difficult matters. That's the academic practice in a nutshell. Around the academic practice (also known as liberal study) has grown an institution, the university. Institutions protect and sustain practices by clearing spaces and creating infrastructure so that those engaged in the practice will have what they need. Institutions do this, in the main, by collecting and distributing money. Only thus can the institution gather resources, like classrooms, lab equipment and libraries, and pay the bills.

The second function of any institution that surrounds a practice, after finances, is to formulate and enforce rules and policies for the participants within the practice. The core rules and policies will be solutions to coordination problems. Participants in the practice need to know who will be where at specific times and what he or she will be doing. At a university, a timetable of class meetings is a solution to a coordination problem. So is the notice of when the library will be open.

Another function of the university as an institution is to set, promote and enforce standards. The standards might be standards of accomplishment, applied to students in their courses and their programs, and applied to professors in their academic activities and in their careers. They might be standards of comportment and dress. They might be standards of academic integrity, dealing with such matters as plagiarism and cheating on exams.

Because institutions deal in rules, policies and standards, central to any institution are structures of governance. Just as a cell has a nucleus to govern it and mitochondria for power, universities as institutions have boards, senates, administrators, unions and committees, each of which is assigned responsibilities and granted powers necessary or useful to fulfilling those responsibilities.

Institutions mediate between, on the one hand, the practice and the practitioners, and, on the other, the wider communities in which the practice and practitioners exist. To extract resources from those communities, the institution has to portray the practice as worthy of the support of people outside the practice.

Saint Mary's University, and almost every university in Canada (and North America), is governed by two distinct legislative bodies: the Board of Governors and the Academic Senate. (What we call the Board of Governors is often called at other universities the Trustees or the Regents. Different universities give different names to the same functions.) The Board of Governors (<https://www.smu.ca/about/board-of-governors.html>) deals with money; Academic Senate (<https://www.smu.ca/about/academic-senate.html>) deals with teaching, learning and research. The

Board of Governors approves budgets and seeks to make sure the university remains solvent. Academic Senate approves courses and programs, sets grading policies, looks after the library, and sets and enforces academic standards and codes of conduct.

The Board of Governors has a degree of oversight on the activities of the Academic Senate and must approve strategic policies.

At Saint Mary's, members of the board of governors are seated at the pleasure of various entities, including the province of Nova Scotia (two members), the Roman Catholic Church (five members) and the Alumni Association (six). The professors at Saint Mary's elect six members of the board from their ranks. The president of Saint Mary's and four people from the Saint Mary's University Students' Association also sit on the board as *ex officio* members. There are 33 board members in total.

The Academic Senate, for its part, has nine *ex officio* members, twenty members of the faculty (all tenured full-time professors), and five students. Thirty-four people, then, are senators.

The titular head of a university is most often called the Chancellor. Our chancellor is Michael Durland, a retired banking executive and the CEO of Melancthon Capital. Dr Durland happens to be an academic himself, a professor at the University of Toronto (it's rare for a university chancellor to be an academic). A necessary condition for being appointed chancellor is being a major donor to the university. (This is true everywhere, not just at Saint Mary's.)

Beside the two legislative bodies, Saint Mary's (and all other universities) has an administration. The administrators are charged with implementing policies and directives issued by the Board of Governors and the Academic Senate and taking care of the day-to-day operations of the university.

The highest administrator is the university president. Our president is Robert Summerby-Murray, a professor of geography. Presidents are also, typically, vice-chancellors of their universities. At some universities, the president is called the rector or principal.

Immediately below the president in the hierarchy of administration is the academic vice president. AVPs are sometimes called the Vice President Academic, the Vice President, Academic and Research (the VPAR, said as "VEE-par"), the Provost.... ("Provost" used to be pronounced "provo" but these days most people speak the "st" part.) Our VPAR is Madine VanderPlaat, a sociology professor. Madine (pronounced "Ma-DEEN-uh") is the interim VPAR, appointed after the former VPAR stepped down and the search for a new one failed; another search is now underway.

Below the academic vice president are the deans of the faculties. At Saint Mary's, we have four faculties: the Faculty of Arts, the Faculty of Science, the Sobey School of Business, and the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research. The president, the academic vice president and the deans are all professors, although while serving as administrators they don't teach and are not required to conduct research. As administrators, they are not members of the faculty union. When they step down (or are dismissed from their position), they return to the ranks of the professors and again are members of the faculty union.

Saint Mary's also has a shadowy cabal, called the Executive Management Group. The EMG is a small group of administrators, including the university's president, that seems to determine what information does and doesn't reach the Board of Governors and what agenda the Board will follow.

The deans and other administrators who are also professors are called "academic administrators," to distinguish them from university administrators who are not professors but were hired for specific administrative offices or roles, such as in Human Resources.

The governance structure of public universities in Canadian provinces is laid down in the provincial act creating the university. The Saint Mary's Act dates from 1970, when Saint Mary's became a fully public university. The Act has been amended two or three times over the years but is basically the same act today as it was in the beginning. In Canada, education, including higher education and universities, is a provincial matter. Nova Scotia, New Brunswick and Prince Edward Island formed a body, the Maritime Provinces Higher Education Commission (MPHRC), which oversees all universities in the three provinces. When a university in the Maritimes seeks to change a program or to create a new one, it must receive MPHEC permission.

Universities must follow provincial regulations and dictates. Universities also sometimes tie themselves to various outside agencies. Some faculties and programs seek accreditation from professional organizations. To be accredited, programs and courses must meet standards set by the accreditor. And then there is the matter of external funding. Professors who wish to attract funding need to tailor their research to the interests of funding bodies. Governments, accreditors and funding agencies can easily deflect professors and students away from the academic endeavour.

The offices of the deans typically have two associate deans. Associate deans are professors seconded to the administration. Though associate deans do not teach a full load of courses, they remain members of the faculty union.

Universities also have a Registrar. The position of registrar has different titles at different universities. Registrars are typically vice presidents or associate vice presidents in their institutions. They are also typically professors, although they are not members of the faculty union while serving as administrators.

The senior academic administrators at a university, then, are the president, the academic vice president or provost, the deans of the faculties, and the registrar. They are "academic" administrators, as we've learned, because they are themselves professors. At least, they are *typically* themselves professors, but this is changing. At some universities these days, the person serving as registrar, for instance, is not an academic. In the United States, not all university presidents are academics anymore.

Each senior academic administrator is an *ex officio* member of the Academic Senate. Only a little more than half the members of our Academic Senate are professors on active duty. The others are administrators and representatives of various campus groups (including the students). That academic senates typically have many members who are not professors on active duty is part of

what has turned academic senates in universities in Canada into vehicles for administrative priorities, rather than academic ones.

Universities will also have plenty of non-academic administrators, that is, administrators who are not professors. Non-academic administrators are the heads of units that look after buildings and grounds, sports and recreation, finance and payroll, enrolment, recruitment, student housing, tech and classroom support, the writing centre, and all the rest. (That they are called “*non-academic administrators*” does not imply that they have nothing to do with teaching or other academic functions. Some non-academic administrators have academic responsibilities. People in writing centres, for instance, are teachers, though they are not professors. The same is often true of people in university units that monitor students whose first language is not English.) Some non-academic administrators are senior members of the university administration, being vice presidents, associate vice presidents or directors.

The most powerful of the non-academic administrative units on campus is Human Resources. Human Resources departments in universities and in business in the past twenty-five or so years have accumulated a lot of clout. Part of the reason for this is increased government regulation with regard to discrimination and harassment. Also significant is the shift in universities led by academic administrators away from their academic missions and toward contemporary social-justice goals.

HR at Saint Mary’s includes conflict-resolution people, an associate vice president of people and culture, talent-acquisition people, and a diversity and inclusion advisor. Our university used to have an associate vice president for Diversity Excellence; the holder of this office was an academic administrator who worked with Human Resources. The power of HR is derived from support given to HR values and priorities by senior academic administrators, academic senates and boards of governors. The expansion of HR departments has not been good for the academic functions of universities, for HR values and priorities are often at odds with academic values and priorities.

In Canada, almost all professors are represented as university employees by their unions or faculty associations. Unionization of professors is less prevalent in the States and most other countries than it is in Canada. Full-time professors and librarians at our university are members of the Saint Mary’s University Faculty Union; professors who teach on a per-course basis are members of the Canadian Union of Public Employees. The university and the faculty union together create a Collective Agreement that specifies professors’ responsibilities and the university’s responsibilities to professors. A goal of unions in Canadian universities, a goal the unions sometimes express publicly, is to take for themselves more and more of the prerogatives and responsibilities of academic senates by writing provisions about academic matters into the collective agreements.

Universities are standardly divided into faculties, each corresponding to a large category of study or professional preparation. Each faculty is headed by a dean. The faculties at a university will typically contain a number of academic units, units that are usually called departments. Almost all professors at Saint Mary’s are members of departments, though a few belong only to interdisciplinary programs. The departments are responsible for crafting and delivering programs. Some programs, called interdisciplinary programs, are not housed in departments although they

draw resources from the departments. Interdisciplinary programs are overseen by program co-ordinators, whose jobs are similar to those of department chairs. The department chairs and program co-ordinators are not considered administrators at the university and they belong to the faculty union.

Another locus of power at a university is its student services unit or department. Student services will advise the academic senate on student codes of conduct and enforce those codes. It might well have power in some areas to create policies and codes itself.

To bring this all into focus, then: beside the Board of Governors and the Academic Senate, power at the university is had by the president, the Executive Management Group, the deans and other senior academic administrators, the senior non-academic administrators who look after finances, the union that represents the regular faculty members, the union for other members of the faculty, Human Resources, and student services.

Here are the structures of governance at Saint Mary's: <https://www.smu.ca/about/governance.html>

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