REVIEW OF WILLIAM G. BOWEN'S & EUGENE M. TOBIN'S

LOCUS OF AUTHORITY

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In an era of rapidly changing technology, unprecedented access to information, and increasing global competition, American colleges and universities face questions from many different quarters about the efficiency and effectiveness of higher education in the 21st Century. Although higher education is often jokingly contrasted with "the real world," the reality is that a strong system of higher education is a critical underpinning for a thriving economy and healthy democracy. Institutions face significant resource constraints while coping with relentless calls from all sides for increased accountability, transparency, affordability, and access. Diverse and sometimes competing constituencies, both in and outside the academy, believe that they should have a say in how these institutions are organized and operated. This complex environment of accountability is the backdrop for a new book about higher education governance by two eminent former college presidents: William G. Bowen's and Eugene M. Tobin's *Locus of Authority: The Evolution of Faculty Roles in the Governance of Higher Education*.[1]

The book consists of an unusual combination of history, contemporary observations and advice, and case studies of how governance has (and has not) worked in practice at several different types of institutions. Defining governance as "simply the location and exercise of authority,"[2] Bowen and Tobin focus on the role of faculty and how it has evolved over time in response to changing conditions in higher education and in society more broadly. In order to illustrate this evolution in a concrete way, the book concludes with lengthy case studies from four institutions with very differ-

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1. WILLIAM G. BOWEN & EUGENE M. TOBIN, LOCUS OF AUTHORITY: THE EVOLUTION OF FACULTY ROLES IN THE GOVERNANCE OF HIGHER EDUCATION (2015). Bowen formerly served as president of Princeton University, and Tobin as president of Hamilton College.

2. *Id.* at ix.

ent histories and missions: the University of California, Princeton University, Macalester College, and The City University of New York. While each of the case studies is interesting and nuanced in its own right from a historical point of view, they tend to dwell heavily on personalities, relationships, and individualized circumstances that may be of somewhat limited applicability to other institutions. For many college and university leaders, therefore, the earlier chapters (in which the authors discuss broadly the evolution of our higher education system, and the issues and challenges we need to face now and in the future) are more likely to be helpful from a practical perspective in addressing governance issues at their own institutions.[3]

From the outset, Bowen and Tobin argue that the system of higher education governance in the United States can impede progress on almost every major issue faced by our colleges and universities, and that the system is in need of reform from within. Rather than focusing on the quality of education delivered in an abstract sense (which the authors readily admit is a complex task), they "concentrate instead on three other crucial aspects of educational outcomes—attainment, degree completion, and disparities in outcomes related to socioeconomic status—that are, in at least some respects, more amenable to analysis."[4] These issues are crucial because they go to the heart of the American dream that has served as a point of pride as well as a rallying cry in our national political and social discourse, especially in recent generations. As Bowen and Tobin put it,

> Our country faces the transcendent challenges of raising the overall level of educational attainment and reestablishing the principle that higher education is the pathway to social mobility. This latter principle, which began to be enunciated forcefully only in the postwar years, is much more fragile and impermanent than we care to admit.[5]

If we continue to believe that higher education is the gateway to opportunity in our society for many different types of careers, as well as a key ingredient in many people's lives that fosters civic engagement and personal fulfillment (among many other benefits that are not strictly economic), we need to look at how our institutions can respond nimbly and effectively to our society's rapidly changing needs, circumstances, and demographics. Bowen and Tobin observe that in our century-old system of academic governance, the role of faculty members has not been focused on being proactive in responding to these sorts of challenges that arise from circumstances that transcend any particular academic discipline.[6] Critics from outside the

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3.   The authors acknowledge that the case studies will be of specialized interest to various readers and can therefore be read as stand-alone contributions, which is why they overlap with material in the main text. *Id.* at xv.

4.   *Id.* at 2.

5.   *Id.*

6.   Based on their own experiences as well as a need to focus their reflections

academy have frequently expressed frustration with what they perceive as the slow pace of change within colleges and universities, marked often by seemingly endless debate and discussion. Of course, the academy's tradition of thoughtful dialogue based on evidence, analysis, and expression, and consideration of different points of view reflects one of the core (and arguably more timeless) learning outcomes for which higher education is rightly praised: the development of critical thinking skills that enable people to question assumptions, explore alternatives, and ultimately foster progress in many different fields.

So how can this governance model of discussion and critical thinking be reconciled with the demands of the 21st Century, in which institutions must respond to changes in technology and globalization quickly and with finite resources? Bowen and Tobin argue that in order for us to make meaningful changes in academic governance, we must first understand the historical evolution of our current system and the values and assumptions on which it was premised. A significant portion of the book is devoted, therefore, to a historical overview of American higher education both before and after World War II. These chapters remind us that broad historical developments and trends have long been reflected in the academy and in discussions about accountability and governance—including the Industrial Revolution and the rise and role of corporations, concerns with balancing freedom of speech and thought with national security interests at times of war, and providing avenues to prepare future workers for new and different sorts of jobs and careers.

Throughout the period covered by this historical overview (primarily from the early 20th Century onward), Bowen and Tobin describe how the role of faculty members in academic governance has changed in ways that reflect the growth and evolution of American higher education and its role in society. The development of research universities, for example, led to tensions between the respective roles and priorities for research and teaching. The articulation and protection of academic freedom in the Progressive Era was in part driven by the professionalization of academic disciplines, and by faculty leaders who saw themselves as having responsibilities to society that transcended individual institutions. The rise of disciplinary societies and associations created tensions between institutional and disciplinary loyalties, and the increasing importance of technology in society helped lead to tensions between humanists and social scientists on one hand, and hard scientists and engineers on the other (especially after World War II).[7] In more recent decades, economic pressures that have led to an increasing reliance on adjunct and non-tenure-track faculty have

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and recommendations, the authors note that they focus "primarily on faculties of arts and science at four-year colleges and universities." *Id.* at 7.

    7.   *Id.* at 161.

created tensions between the rights and responsibilities of faculty members with different types of contractual arrangements.[8]

All of these tensions within the academy underscore the fact that the faculty role and voice in governance cannot be understood as a monolithic block. These tensions have magnified over time at many institutions that have become larger and more complex, and that have taken on new functions and responsibilities. Differences among faculty roles within and across institutions (as well as within and across academic units and departments) must be recognized and addressed in order for successful academic governance models to be developed and sustained over time. Bowen and Tobin rightly point out that we need institutional governance structures that reflect and incorporate the reality of these differences in faculty roles and circumstances.[9]

In Chapter 4, the authors review a short list of topics in which the nature and degree of faculty authority has sometimes been the source of controversy within higher education (e.g., the selection and tenure of the president, budgetary and staffing questions related to non-tenure-track faculty, and authority to determine teaching methods in the digital age).[10] They review models from various institutions that address each of these issues and also provide helpful examples. Like the case studies at the end of the book, however, these examples are sometimes heavily dependent on local circumstances that may not translate easily to other institutional contexts (e.g., public and private institutions may have very different external governance structures and pressures that in turn have an impact on internal governance models). Bowen and Tobin do, however, offer basic principles that can serve as useful checklists for institutions in reviewing their governance policies and practices in these areas[11]—even as each institution must account for its own particular history and circumstances.

In general, Bowen and Tobin do not have a comprehensive set of specific suggestions for governance structures that will work for all institutions, which would be an impossible task given the variations in the size, scope, mission, resources, and circumstances of the full panoply of American colleges and universities. Rather than identifying a specific or rigid sort of governance structure, Bowen and Tobin seem to embrace the need to combine formal and informal approaches to governance in order to address different types of challenges, even as they point out the potential shortcomings of less formal or specifically delineated forms of faculty involvement in decision-making (e.g., ambiguity with regard to the necessary or optimal degree of faculty involvement and consultation on general matters of all

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8. *Id.* at 132.

9. *Id.*

10. *Id.* at 133.

11. *See, e.g., Id.* at 163-64 (list of propositions regarding faculty appointments).

kinds).[12] They point out, for example, that informal networks can be effec-
tive in tackling issues that cut broadly across disciplinary lines—including
ad hoc committees and task forces that are commonly used in higher educa-
tion.[13] As much as faculty members and administrators in higher education
like to complain about committees, they may in fact be one of the most im-
portant elements of effective governance as a means to gather input, en-
gender thoughtful analysis, and develop potential options and solutions.

  Given their backgrounds and experience with technology and online ed-
ucation in particular, it is not surprising that many of the authors' most
probing insights about governance relate to this controversial and timely
topic. The digital revolution and the development of various forms of
online education are the latest battleground for many academic governance
issues related to the control of the curriculum, academic freedom, and intel-
lectual property rights. These issues are not really new—advances in tech-
nology throughout our history, and especially in the past century (such as
the advent of radio and television, even before the Internet) have led to dis-
cussions about how we teach and learn, and whether there are efficiencies
to be gained with new modes of communication. What has happened re-
cently, however, according to Bowen and Tobin, is that "lines between
content, technology, and pedagogy have blurred."[14] They argue that this
development necessitates "more horizontal ways of organizing discussion
of new approaches to teaching and learning."[15]

  Bowen and Tobin describe a series of trade-offs in dealing with this
complex topic. On the one hand, they bluntly assert that faculty members
must give up "any claim to sole authority over teaching methods of all
kinds,"[16] while also being given "an important seat at a bigger table" to
promote collaborative decision-making regarding the broader investment
in, and use of, online education in the curriculum.[17] While their observa-
tions and recommendations in this area are somewhat general, the authors'
admonitions to everyone involved in higher education remind us that issues
of this magnitude require the involvement of many different parties (just as
the successful development and application of this technology for pedagog-
ical purposes relies on the involvement of faculty as well as many different
types of staff and support).

  Online education is just one area in which Bowen and Tobin claim that a
collaborative approach is essential to decision-making in higher education
now and in the future. Throughout the book, the authors point to examples

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    12.   *Id.* at 147.
    13.   *Id.* at 144.
    14.   *Id.* at 207.
    15.   *Id.*
    16.   *Id.* at 173.
    17.   *Id.*

from the case studies, and to their own extensive experience, in arguing that some of the most successful stories of institutional transformation have occurred as the result of cooperative and collaborative relationships and efforts among administrators and faculty in particular (and also other entities or individuals who have roles to play in governance, such as governing boards).

In other words, old-fashioned personal relationships and interpersonal communication still matter in higher education governance. No amount or type of technology can remove the human element from an enterprise in which we seek to transform the lives of future generations of people through education. Accordingly, Bowen and Tobin remind faculty and administrators alike of the need to treat each other with mutual respect in recognition of their collective commitment to the educational mission:

> Faculty and administrators alike generally believe strongly in the value of what they are doing—otherwise many would have chosen different life paths. In thinking about these roles, it is much better to err in the direction of assuming the best about faculty and administrative colleagues than assuming bad behavior that may, in fact, be brought about only by the assumption that it is likely.[18]

This kind of common-sense civility is often in short supply in our country, and college and university leaders can provide a useful educational service by modeling this sort of behavior for future generations of leaders and decision-makers.

Academic leaders who are looking for easy answers, quick fixes, or canned solutions to governance challenges in higher education will not find them in *Locus of Authority*. The authors succeed more in being descriptive than in being prescriptive. Given the broad array of constituencies who can and should have a stake in higher education and its future, as well as the multi-faceted and human-focused nature of our educational mission, it should perhaps come as no surprise that higher education governance is, and will continue to be, a somewhat messy and complex business. As Bowen and Tobin point out, the very phrase "shared governance" can create ambiguity and uncertainty in the minds of many people, especially those outside the academy who are accustomed to "top-down" corporate models of governance.[19] This concept may not sit well with critics who believe that our model of higher education in this country is broken, that it is not sufficiently nimble and responsive to the current needs of society, and that its governance structures need to be radically overhauled.

Bowen and Tobin strike an overall optimistic if unsentimental tone in responding to such critics, and suggest that the academy is capable of re-

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18.   *Id.* at 212.
19.   *Id.* at 205-12.

forming itself from within—and indeed has demonstrated in the past that it can do so. While they focus their attention on the faculty role in particular, their analysis of governance challenges could benefit from an even further exploration of the increasingly powerful pressures being exerted from forces external to the academy—including political forces at the federal and state level that reflect the voices of skeptics who believe that higher education is too insular and not sufficiently accountable to the taxpayers and the general public.

In spite of all of the crosswinds that buffet institutions of higher education, Bowen and Tobin's focus on the faculty role in particular is a powerful reminder that our faculty members are educators at the front lines of our mission on a daily basis, and that meaningful changes in how and what we teach will be difficult if not impossible without their buy-in. Educational leaders need to appreciate and embrace this reality, and to communicate openly and honestly about it, if they want to create and sustain long-term institutional transformation.