

RU Engaged Notes
Shared Governance: The Role of Support Staff
2/27/09

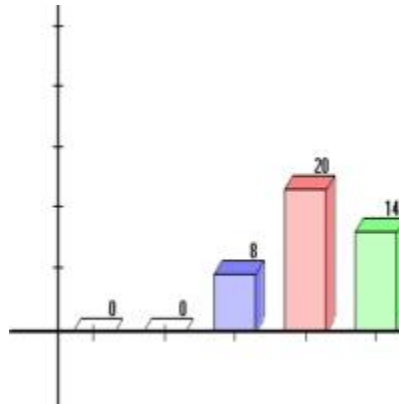
Facilitators Kathy Taddei (Department of Foreign Languages Secretary and CWA Vice President) and Theresa Craig (English Department Secretary and CWA Secretary) welcomed the audience and gave an overview of the RU Engaged Series.

The session began with the following definition of shared governance:

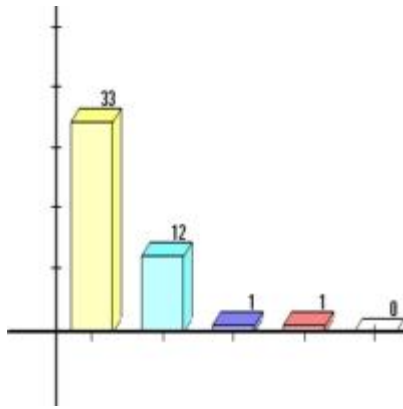
At Rowan, shared governance is defined as “a set of practices under which faculty and staff participate in significant decisions affecting the University.” (Source: Board of Trustees Resource Manual, taken from the American Association of University Professors [AAUP])

Support staff were then asked to participate in an iclicker survey. The responses are as follows:

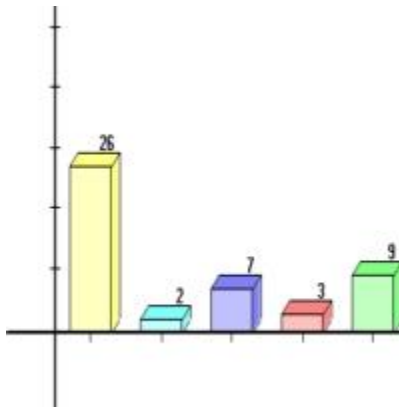
1. To what degree do you feel support staff are involved in shared governance at Rowan University?
 - a. extremely 0
 - b. very involved 0
 - c. somewhat involved 8
 - d. only certain professional staff are involved 20
 - e. not at all 14



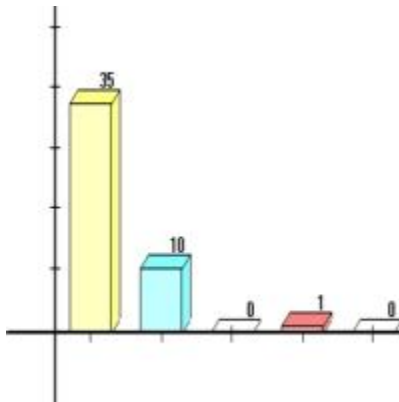
2. At what level would you rate your own participation in shared governance on campus, with 1 being the lowest level and 15 the highest?
 - a. 1 33
 - b. 2 12
 - c. 3 1
 - d. 4 1
 - e. 5 0



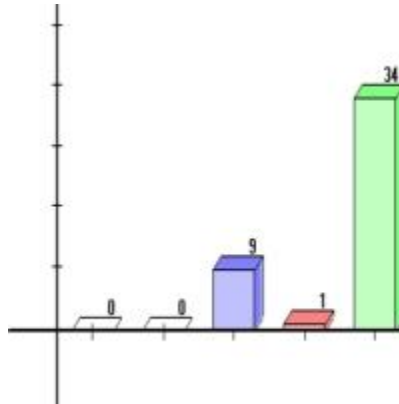
3. I most often participate in shared governance by
- | | |
|--|----|
| a. contacting my direct supervisor | 26 |
| b. serving on committees | 2 |
| c. contacting the unions | 7 |
| d. contacting the decision-makers directly | 3 |
| e. other | 9 |



4. To what level do you think the administration considers the opinions of support staff in shared governance, with 1 being the lowest level and 5 the highest?
- | | |
|------|----|
| a. 1 | 35 |
| b. 2 | 10 |
| c. 3 | 0 |
| d. 4 | 1 |
| e. 5 | 0 |



5. Based on observations that some support staff choose not to participate in shared governance, which of the following do you think is the primary contributing factor?
- a. Support staff are content with the way things are. 0
 - b. Support staff lack time. 0
 - c. Support staff lack information in how to participate. 9
 - d. Support staff do not care. 1
 - e. Support staff believe that no one listens anyway. 34



General Comments:

Comment #1:

Support staff do not get involved because we are not asked. We don't make a difference anyway.

Comment #2:

There's been a lot of discussion, but we've never seen results or paths to follow once we do give our suggestions. We never see any issues addressed. It would help if we are at least given an answer. Rowan is a fantastic place to work, but when it comes to shared governance, there's not much intention to include us, or at least we don't see it.

Comment #3:

When I think of shared governance, I think of an ideal place where everyone has a voice. Unfortunately, I feel at Rowan we don't follow through on shared governance. Recently administration did a search for an Associate Vice President for Administration and Finance. They chose two finalists and invited everyone to meet them. We filled out surveys, but we were never given the results. It seems that we never get the results or know why they made a decision.

Comment #4:

One of the barriers is lack of communication, both up and down. Many of the support staff don't know where to go with certain issues, and because we're timid or shy or whatever, many of us just talk among ourselves about the issues. I don't know what the answer is; I go to my chairperson for certain things, but she also has to report to someone, who reports to someone else, and so on. It just goes up the chain of command.

I think communication can be addressed by having some gatherings of support staff and maybe some administrators, some faculty, as a mix of different parts of campus to decide how to do things. Rather than going to our union, there are things that can be settled without making a union issue of it.

Facilitator Comment:

Speaking as a support staff member, I envision shared governance as a strong link between academic and administrative offices. A tool should be crafted to enhance communication. Oftentimes we spin our wheels trying to put out fires. We need to establish an on-campus study team with the goal of putting together a manual with correct, up-to-date information on policies and procedures. Information should be gathered from all areas, and we need organizational commitment from all faculty and professional staff. This would save precious time and money. This would definitely assist support staff in projecting a positive image of ourselves and our work.

Many of us have worked tirelessly for our students with no possibility of reclassification or upgrades, and consequently morale is low. I believe we can come up with solutions. Given Rowan's autonomy, we should be able to accomplish more locally, without involving Trenton. We are hopeful that the latest 11 desk audits will result in the upgrades that they have waited for, for 16 years.

We need to have a serious discussion between academic and administrative offices with implementation of an operational manual for support staff.

Comment #5:

What will happen with the results today? Many of us were strongly encouraged to come. Other than the initial invitation of the e-mail, I didn't get information about what will happen after today's meeting.

Facilitator Response:

We will go away with more thoughts and ideas about shared governance as a result of today's meeting. We'll be better able to work on some solutions.

Comment #6:

I took minutes this summer for a meeting and was able to learn more about the jobs of higher administration. I thought it was very interesting. I'm sure there are many people in here who are not aware of what others do on campus. If we had something on the website, we would be better able to address some issues when people come in and ask us questions. Just from the minutes I took this summer, I'm aware of where I can go for certain questions or issues. I've been here five years and just learned this information this past summer.

Facilitator Comment:

We can be green by having an electronic manual; we don't need a hard copy. We can get a team together to tackle this project. I see it as a major issue for support staff, and we also need to keep updating the manual. Another problem is that a lot of times one person is designated for a particular responsibility, and if that person goes on vacation, for example, there is no backup. This needs to be addressed also.

Comment #7:

It was mentioned earlier that we have autonomy, and the full range of job titles is up in Trenton. Why do we have to go through the Department of Personnel to get reclassified?

My second question is, does upper management really know what support staff do? We're the backbone for them. Do they understand that, and can they go to bat for us?

President Farish:

I only know part of the answer on this. Autonomy is not total; we are still subject to the Office of Employee Rights; they oversee what we do. The appeal for reclassification does go there. What we have is a system that says, “Here are the job classifications; here are the tasks associated with them.” Every university I’ve worked in has the same system—desk audit, compare tasks to job titles, appeal if necessary.

On the larger issue of whether administration knows what support staff does, the answer is “no.” We have 1100 people working on this campus, so part of the problem is a size issue.

As for what we get out of today’s session, the reason I’m here is to hear what you have to say. I’m thinking of mechanisms that will give support staff more of a voice. The manual is a good idea. I’ve also seen a council established on some campuses. I can see putting together such a council myself, so that I can invite support staff to come once a semester or once a year to discuss things.

I’m troubled by the fact that so many of you are feeling disenfranchised. This is a good place to work, but there are morale issues. The burden falls back on administration.

We also need to be clear about what shared governance is. There are representatives who sit on committees; we’ll never have everyone in the room at the same time. But it’s important that you feel empowered, that you feel your role is important for the success of the University, and that you have an outlet for your concerns. To the extent that information flow is not working well, we need to decide what we can put in place to allow more people to feel better about their role, perhaps more public forums where people can actually get answers to their questions. This is not just an empty exercise; we will follow through.

Facilitator Comment:

There are notes being taken and they will be posted online. You can also e-mail comments to ruengaged@rowan.edu. If you have an idea after this meeting, this is a way to make yourself heard.

Comment #8:

I want to address the point about policies and procedures. On the Provost’s website there is a list of academic policies and procedures; anyone looking for a roadmap of our academic operations can go there.

Comment #9:

When I have a full-time faculty member coming to me asking how to do something pertaining to their class, I shouldn’t be the one telling them what to do. This semester, with many new adjuncts, I’ve received many questions and requests. The Registrar’s website has a lot of information, and I’ve sent that link to everyone in the department. Unfortunately, I’m still having full-time faculty ask me questions.

Comment #10:

Nothing is sent out as an e-mail blurb when, for example, Purchasing has a change in procedures, and so we’re not informed. That’s why it would be helpful to have a handbook for all of us.

Comment #11:

I feel that there are a lot of policies that are open to interpretation. Sometimes the answers don't come in a manual when it's left up to the discretion of a specific individual. That's my frustration—it works when you do something one way, and then the next time it works differently or you get a different answer.

Comment #12:

If you look around the various websites on the computer, you'll find most of what you need to know. Faculty need guidance. I'm not saying you need to hold their hands, but it's part of this job.

Comment #13:

I respectfully disagree with you. Most department secretaries will tell you we don't have time to search websites for the answers we need.

Comment #14:

I really like the idea of a support staff council. When I first started in my current position, and was in charge of ordering paper, that's not written down anywhere, and also there's no place that tells you how to reserve a table in the Student Center. It would help to take new support staff out to lunch so that they can get to know people and learn how things work here.

Comment #15:

If we have new people coming on, we should really try to help mentor them. I've tried to make myself the "go to" person and I get calls all the time. I don't really have the time, but I want to help people. If everyone looks around and has lunch with someone newer than you are, it would help.

Comment #16:

In our building, we secretaries have always helped each other. One time we encountered a problem with a new secretary; some of the faculty in that department told her, "Don't listen to any of the secretaries in the building because they won't help you correctly." That was an insult. It hasn't happened since, but it was very upsetting to the secretaries because we all get along very well and help each other out. We're like a big family. Rowan is a great place to work, but there are still issues to be resolved.

Administrator Comment:

We're about to roll out a program of mentoring throughout the support staff system. Mostly what I'm hearing today is how you can do your work better; that's a sort of tangent to shared governance but still excellent ideas.

I would be happy to meet with a support staff council. To discuss terms and issues of employment, I meet regularly with CWA officers and we have open dialogue. You are on the front line and are critically important to what this institution does.

Administrator Comment:

I am also noticing that many of the concerns you have about how you can do your job better are coming more from the academic side rather than administrative. That leads me to believe that those of you on the academic side have different responsibilities.

Comment #17:

My question is, if we were to approach an administrator with concerns about someone else in our area, how would my concerns be valued? You might know the situation, but you might not. Should I speak up? Some of us are afraid that if we do, we might be labeled as troublemakers.

Administrator Comment:

Good point—some of us don't know what's going on. At least in my case, the door is open.

Comment #18:

We're the beams of the building, and the building doesn't stand without us. If I don't know something, I'll call and find out what I need to know. I keep on learning.

Administrator Comment:

As I'm listening to these comments, I'm feeling guilty that I don't thank my support staff enough. Not only are they doing the work but sometimes they're my psychiatrist as well. I have to thank my group because I do appreciate what they do, and I appreciate all of the secretaries in our College. We are appreciative, and maybe we just have to say it more often.

Comment #18:

Our job as secretaries has changed drastically over the last 15 years. I think as a secretary you have to keep an open mind because things are changing all the time and you have to be prepared to change, too.

Comment #19:

In my position, I see at the beginning of every term that there's a lot of help new adjuncts need. It would be helpful from a University standpoint if some committee or council could be formed to bring adjuncts on board. If that could be consolidated, it would help so many departments. There needs to be a cohesive effort for that, but it would make the job of the support staff easier.

Comment #20:

Our department has an adjunct handbook to help the new faculty members, but there are so many details involved in the hiring paperwork, too.

Comment #21:

I've been at Rowan for 17 years and, moving from a position where I did a lot of accounting work to my current position as secretary, I see a huge difference. I've noticed it's not about appreciation but about respect.

Conclusion

The facilitators thanked the audience for their participation and reminded them of the last session on shared governance in the RU Engaged series: 10:30 Wednesday, March 25 – role of administration in shared governance.

Written Comments / Suggestions / Questions

At each session, index cards are provided on the tables so that audience members may write comments. Below are comments and suggestions provided from this session:

1. Look at Temple University for a model of an online database, "Knowledgebase," which has key information and allows for the posting of questions and responses, as well as for updating information when necessary.
2. You need to have a boss who encourages you to get involved and not make you feel as if you cannot serve. Support staff should also be able to attend workshops for self-improvement.
3. The only route a support staff member has is their union.
4. Support staff must demand respect. In order to demand respect, you must act and dress professionally. Until this happens, support staff will not get the respect they deserve.
5. Support staff must go "above and beyond" before they get respect. It's not just an 8:00 to 4:00 job. Get to work on time. Be willing to come in or stay late if necessary.

6. Department chair secretaries should stop complaining and find out exactly where their job is. If you're doing something that is not in your job description, talk to your supervisor. Communicate—that's the key!
7. If we want to be taken more seriously, we need to act more professionally, dress more professionally. Instead of complaining, give constructive criticism. Instead of wondering when administration will give us information, how about keeping current with issues that affect the community as a whole? Make the effort to read e-mails and ask questions. While I realize that support staff are underpaid and in some cases overworked, for the most part we are very lucky to work in such a place. Learn new things, keep abreast of issues, be more active in campus life. If you're asked to be involved, don't complain that it's not part of your job description!
8. I would like to see a support staff council and outreach. There is so much information that just gets passed between staff members—and lunch with new support staff from various departments could be beneficial.
9. I think that the problems come when supervisors do not care or are not supervising.
10. After working several years in the same department, under three different directors, I have never been asked to participate in any decision-making.
11. It would have been nice if support staff had been involved in the organization of this meeting. Support staff are often limited to a specific lunch period and time away from the office. The time of this meeting is inconvenient for many.
[Note: Support staff were involved in organizing this RU Engaged session, and lunchtime was chosen as a time that might be convenient for the majority.]
12. Support staff has not been included in shared governance discussions by the administration of Student Affairs.
13. Don't penalize us for participating.
14. Support staff are not involved because they're not asked. If you offer your opinion, you're not listened to anyway.