

Redefining University Governance – A Response to the Report of the Working Group on University Governance of the Institute for Governance of Private and Public Organizations

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The Institute for Governance of Private and Public Organizations (IGPPO) created a Working Group on University Governance in December of 2006, with a mandate “to propose principles of sound governance that would be relevant and effective in the context of Quebec universities”. The outcome – a report released in September, 2007¹ – has been denounced by our provincial organization, the Fédération québécoise des professeurs et professeurs d’université (FQPPU), as an unbalanced document advocating excessive concentration of power in a handful of external members (referred to as “independent” members throughout the report) on university boards of governors. The McGill Association of University Teachers (MAUT) and the Concordia University Faculty Association (CUFA) are in complete agreement with the excellent analysis provided by Pierre Hébert, Cécile Sabourin and the FQPPU Executive in their paper “*Who ‘owns’ the university? Certainly not a new managerial oligarchy*”². Their title speaks volumes.

The FQPPU analysis does not address, however, the IGPPO report’s purposeful disregard of the current governance structures of universities. It is important to note that the report is not titled “The University Board of Governors” - it is called “Report of the Working Group on University Governance”, implying that the authors will begin by acknowledging the principles of governance that characterize universities. Curiously, without any justification, they choose not to. This is unfortunate since in Quebec, in Canada and in North America, universities are founded on a relatively well-defined system of shared governance with a long tradition. The fundamental feature - bicameral governance based on a senate and a board of governors - is essentially ignored in this report. Indeed, the concept of a strong and effective university senate as central to the mission of the university is entirely missing from the IGPPO report – the very idea of a senate is viewed as either a paradox or a challenge and it is dismissed without further discussion. The fundamental role of collegial governance is never mentioned.

According to the IGPPO report, the board of governors would ideally consist of about 15 members, 10 of whom would be external. The board would control the hiring and compensation of senior management, with definitive power over their subsequent objectives and actions - principally strategic planning and the establishment of performance measures for teaching and research. Operationally, the board would function with just three powerful committees – audit, governance/ethics and human resources – composed exclusively of external members. No representatives of the university community would be allowed. Elected members from the university faculty, staff or students would be relegated to a small minority on the board, marginalized and denied equal participation.

The power of the human resources committee would be immense – hiring, directing, evaluating and rewarding senior management, and defining salary policy for all employee groups. In the IGPPPO concept of a university, directives would flow from the board through a central management unit that is chosen, monitored and backed by the board to oversee the functioning of different sectors - the board being the authority “with ultimate decision-making powers”. The academy would lose its power to participate on search and selection committees for key academic administrators - it could do no more than suggest candidates, a pointless exercise. Search committees would be composed solely of external board members with no representation from the university community - a process that would completely transform the administration of the university.

As pointed out by the FQPPU Executive, the strengthening of the external (read “business”) component on the board of governors reinforces the trend towards commercialization of the university. This is particularly apparent in the last section of the report, headed "Good governance requires accountability and transparency". The title strikes us as appropriate for the conclusion of a report on governance, and one would expect a recommendation that the senate and board jointly account for what has been done in terms of the mission of the university. Instead we are presented with a very narrow idea of accountability coupled with a view of transparency that is completely contrary to the openness one expects in a university. In a novel interpretation of transparency, the report argues that external observers at board meetings would violate accountability, reduce effectiveness and should thus be excluded. In addition, there is no direct mention of the senate, only a reference that the board must ensure that the "other decision making bodies" demonstrate accountability. Accountability is reduced to a system of reports that include data and indicators to “assess the quality of teaching” and “evaluate research activities and performance." How does one measure the quality of teaching by a few indicators? Are there generally accepted measures to allow direct comparison of research activities and performance among institutions? Such a reductionist notion of accountability trivializes the university's mission.

In an IGPPPO university, faculty and staff are directed by “management”, and conform to a variety of performance indicators. Management, in turn, is directed by the board. The vital roles of senate – involving the entire university community in decision-making, fostering free debate and exchange of ideas, promoting transparency – are completely ignored and its power is minimal. There is no emphasis on the unique environment that constitutes a university, no recognition that it differs fundamentally from a corporation, that it is a community and *not* a company. Not once did the IGPPPO report discuss the concept of academic freedom and indicate how it would be recognized and protected in this corporate-based design. It is a design to be rejected, in the strongest possible terms.

1. http://www.im.gopp.ca/en/Publications/30_IGOPP%20University%20Final%20Report-Nov%2028.pdf

2. <http://fqppu.org/bibliotheque/prises-de-position/lettres-ouvertes/20071/a-review-of-the-report-on-quebec-university-governance-who-owns-the-university-certainly-not-a-new-m.html>

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