Community College Leaders Vow to Make Governance Work

Utica, NY – Motivated by the current economic crisis and the national rhetoric against public education, governance leaders from community colleges across New York State will convene in Utica this week to share ideas for keeping faculty involved in making decisions that affect the academic integrity of their institutions.

The conference “Making Governance Work in Challenging Times” is sponsored by the Faculty Council of Community Colleges, the community college faculty governance body for SUNY.

The “challenging times” referenced in the conference title are largely due to economic factors, explained Steven Richman, co-chair of the Faculty Council Governance Committee and professor of psychology at Nassau Community College. When funds are scarce, collaborative decision making processes are often circumvented by administrators in the interest of expediency, he said.

“This conference will be focused on keeping the lines of communication open when decision making processes have to be expedited in these difficult times,” said Tina Good, president of the Faculty Council and professor of English at Suffolk County Community College.

The two-day conference is expected to draw at least 25 presidents and presiding officers from community college faculty governance bodies across the state. Participants will discuss tools for relationship building, the differences between faculty unions and governance bodies, and issues related to academic freedom.
The Faculty Council represents faculty from the 30 community colleges in New York State. Governance leaders at these colleges face many of the same challenges, said Eileen Abrahams, vice president of the Faculty Council and professor at Schenectady County Community College. Given today’s hard economic realities and shrinking budgets, “there is a tendency to increase administrative oversight, often by increasing the size of administrations. That tendency often results in a further tendency to short-circuit consultation with faculty,” Abrahams said.

Co-Chair Michael Delaney of Erie Community College agreed. “Shared governance is seen as a nuisance and a roadblock to efficient operation,” he said. “The business model of higher education has become unquestioned orthodoxy. There is a national rhetoric that is actively hostile to public services of all sorts and that blames public employees for our [nation’s] budgetary problems.”

But in difficult economic times, said Richman, “faculty expertise is critical to maintaining the academic integrity of the institution.”

Good said it is imperative for community college faculty to have these conversations. “Community colleges are in the national rhetoric right now,” said Good. “We want to make sure we’re having conversations about our missions without having them defined for us by government agencies or philanthropic organizations.”

The conference will be held Sept. 23 and 24 at the Hotel Utica in Utica, NY.

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