# Reinventing Governance at Bellevue College

## Follow-up Report to the President from the Reinventing Governance Task Force

## Presented on June 9, 2015

# Continued work of the Reinventing Governance Task Force

On April 7, 2015, the Reinventing Governance Task Force (RGTF), presented A Report to the President to President's Cabinet. The report included the background and rationale for the work of the RGTF, the original charge from President Rule, a philosophy and ideals for a new governance system, disclaimers and limitations of proposed changes, analysis of key issues, and three models for consideration. While the task force addressed several important aspects of governance, it made only one firm recommendation: any new system of governance include, for the purpose of management and coordination, governance coordinator and/or governance committee.

Following the April 7 presentation, President Rule requested that the RGTF continue its work through the end of the spring quarter in order to broadly communicate its findings and solicit feedback from across the campuses. The RGTF met next on April 27 to plan open comment sessions, and again on May 18 and June 1 to analyze and synthesize its findings. Ten open comment sessions were held: four general sessions on May 7, two sessions on North Campus on May 4 and May 13, a session with translators targeted at second shift workers on May 12, a session organized for students on May 19, and two sessions on May 22 to accommodate any faculty members unable to attend previous sessions. A total of 125 students, faculty, and staff attended and shared their perspectives. In addition, members of the task force were present at each session to give a broad sense of RGTF discussions. After a review of the key governance issues, attendees were asked to consider an initiative of importance and how it might move through each of the proposed models. (A list of Open Comment Session Attendees broken down by position, a document collecting the Post-it Note Capture Open Comment Sessions, and notes from all the sessions can be found on SharePoint.)

## Key findings

The following themes emerged out of the open comment sessions:

- **Lack of clarity regarding decision making**. Attendees reported a lack of clarity about the current decision-making process—and college processes in general. A majority were unaware of the Committee Book and those who were aware felt there were discrepancies between what was listed in the book and what actually happened on campus. (One listed committee hasn't met in five years.) Attendees wondered who was responsible for decision making and who had the authority to make decisions. The RGTF concluded that what we have is a management structure, but lacking many of the elements of what is commonly considered a higher education governance structure.
- **Distinguishing between management and governance:** Many of the issues brought up in the open comment sessions and illustrated in the post-it note comment exercise, fall clearly into the realm of management rather than governance (e.g. scheduling, tracking maintenance projects, public safety). Some management issues, however, if they are chronic and significant, could rise to the level of a governance matter. Based on this feedback and on its own deliberations, the RGTF advocates clear distinctions between governance and management. However, the RGTF acknowledges that a "mature" understanding of these distinctions will need to develop over time. A governance constitution, as well as council and committee bylaws can help clarify these areas.
- **The question of "shared governance."** A number of attendees expressed a preference for "shared" governance, although it wasn't always clear what was meant by the term. In general, attendees in favor of shared governance were concerned with faculty leadership and autonomy

and with clarity about what decisions can be made on levels other than the presidential. The term "shared governance" implies that there are areas of "primary responsibility" for some constituencies, particularly the faculty's primary responsibility for academic matters of the college. As an example of how this might operate in practice, the RGTF notes that Curriculum Advisory Committee currently makes recommendations to the vice president of Instruction. These are rarely overturned and are not forwarded to the president for review. Many attendees and members of the RGTF feel there needs of be a more inclusive system for collaboration with faculty regarding all academic matters and that differing opinions should be documented.

- **Equitable representation.** More than one attendee questioned whether the priority of the new system would be to create the most inclusive system of representation or to make decisions in the best interest of the institution. A related question was also posed: whether individuals within the governance system should act as representatives of a category of employment or decide issues based on what would be best for the institution overall. Some attendees, particularly faculty, expressed the importance of representing a particular interest or constituency and not having that voice be diluted or overruled by functional councils or an All College Council. Other attendees favored the model with more functional councils because it would allow them to act in the best overall interest of the institution. The RGTF acknowledges both of these concerns and discussed different ways to accommodate them regardless of the chosen structure.

  Other questions about representation concerned North Campus and groups that might find it difficult to participate fully in governance, such as non-English speakers, part-time faculty, students, or individuals whose jobs require covering a desk position. Many attendees favored elections for committee membership and term limits in order to avoid having the same people on multiple committees, and in that way facilitate equity.

- **Trade-offs between communication and efficiency.** There was no overall consensus about whether there should be an all college council (ACC) as part of a new system. Discussion of this element typically dealt with perceived trade-offs between the greater communication, discussion, and review that an ACC would enable and the possibility of a slow and unresponsive bureaucracy. Whether a new system includes an ACC or not, attendees felt that firm timelines and a good communication plan will be essential. The RGTF and attendees overwhelmingly agreed that communication between recommending councils and college leadership travel in both directions. Recommendations from governance entities should be well-considered and in writing; if recommendations are overruled, that judgement should require a written rationale, rather than a veto or no response. The RGTF discussed ways to create communication channels in the absence of an ACC; and the need to provide an accelerated process for time-sensitive matters if an ACC is part of the structure.

- **Roles of the president and the board of trustees.** Some attendees asked whether it will be possible to bring issues directly to the board of trustees or to the president, which raised a couple of issues. In general, the RGTF feels that it will be important for the leadership to support the system by discouraging work-arounds. For the governance structure to function, the board of trustees, the president, and the vice presidents will need to impose discipline, particularly at the outset when it may seem as if the new governance structure isn't as familiar and nimble as the current way of operating. At the same time, the RGTF distinguishes between communicating

and informing—as in constituency reports to the board—and formal recommendations from the governance structure.

Another question related to the board: do initiatives from the board of trustees, the president, and the rest of the leadership team need to work through the governance system? In general, attendees felt that even though the governance system wouldn't be able to overrule the president and the board of trustees, it would be important that all initiatives, no matter their source, be addressed by the governance system, if only to solicit valuable feedback. In order for this to happen efficiently, the board of trustees should be aware of how the governance system functions. In general, attendees recognized that given WA state law, decisions by the councils, committees, and other governance entities could be overturned, but that overruling a formal recommendation should be limited in practice as much as possible.

- **Institutional resource allocation.** In many cases, initiatives developed within the governance structure will require resources—space, personnel, funding, and/or technology—so resource allocation needs to be addressed. Many open comment session attendees asked how governance and resource planning would link up. Throughout the work of the task force, many people argued that recommendations from the governance entities should be properly vetted for feasibility, especially financial feasibility. This issue was difficult to discuss because there was a lack of knowledge regarding how resource allocation currently operates at the college. Greater clarity about this process will be a crucial step in moving forward.

- **Implementation challenges.** Many attendees expressed concern over the resource requirements of a new governance system particularly in terms of employee time. Because the current framework of committees and task forces are so little understood, it could seem as if the adoption of a new governance model might create a heavy additional workload. While the consolidation and rationalization of existing functions may mitigate this workload, the RGTF recognizes that establishing a new governance framework; training students and personnel to use it effectively; enabling more equitable opportunities for participation; moving to a new system will demand resources and will also require a significant cultural shift. Some attendees advocated an analysis of the trade-offs between the existing system and a new system. The RGTF recognizes that the transition to a new governance structure will not be quick, easy, or free, and it will require patience and an iterative process to realize its full benefits.

## WA state law for 4-year institutions

The RGTF discussed the possibility that Bellevue College may move to four-year status, an issue that was also brought up at a few of the open comment sessions, either as part of Washington State University or as an independent state college. The task force wondered whether four-year status in the state of Washington would create a different legal framework for governance. The legislation for WSU and The Evergreen College read virtually the same in the sections entitled "Trustees—General powers and duties of board" (RCW 28B.35.120 and 28B.40.120). Both provide for "full control" by the board of trustees including the power to "employ the president…his assistants, members of the faculty, and other employees." These RCWs go beyond those established for community and technical colleges by explicitly referencing faculty. RCW 28B.35.120 (3) reads, "With the assistance of the faculty of the regional university, shall prescribe the course of study in the various schools and departments thereof…." Although the RGTF based its analysis on our current status, the recommendations are compatible with the types of changes being discussed with WSU.

## Responses to proposed models:

The three models discussed at the open comment sessions were explicitly positioned as tentative, containing elements that could be added, subtracted, or shifted. Before the introduction of the models, attendees were asked to identify an "initiative of importance" and write it on a post-it note. After a review of the models, attendees were asked to place their post-it on the model that "resonated" the most with them or the one that they could see themselves in more clearly. Model #3 had the greatest number of post-its in almost all of the sessions. It should be noted that some post-its didn't describe "initiatives," some were critical of Model #3, and some people used more than one post-it. A few people didn't like any of the models, although none of those attendees liked the current system either.

There were differing opinions about two crucial aspects: a centralized college council or all college council (ACC) the members of which would discuss or announce all matters; and the number of functional councils. Those in favor of an ACC cited the importance of communication and the opportunity to vet issues with a wide variety of perspectives. Others felt an ACC might slow down processes and burden an already strained campus. Some attendees preferred one functional council— Budget and Planning. Others saw value in having three functional councils—Budget and Planning; Student and Academic Affairs; and Operations.

There was no support voiced in favor of keeping the current system, at least partly because most attendees weren't clear on how the current system functions.

## Recommendations

- **Adopt guiding principles.** In addition to the ten governance ideals discussed in the previous report, two additional guiding principles for decision-making were discussed. First, decisions should be made in the best interest of the institution and in support of its mission. Second, decision-making should be guided by "empathic reciprocity"—that the trade-offs between competing interests be balanced over time.
- **Develop a comprehensive communication strategy integrated into an overall institutional strategy.**
- **Identify a governance coordinator (GC).** One suggestion is to hire the GC now in order to assist with planning and implementation.
- **Use other institutions as resources.** Some preliminary work has been done in this area, but it needs to continue during the summer.
- **Plan for equitable representation** (North Campus, part-time personnel, different language groups). Individuals participating in governance must be supported through training, release time, or stipending.
- **Adopt standardized formats (templates) for intake (how issues are put forward), minutes, recommendations, and responses.**
- **Develop a system with constituency councils and some configuration of functional council(s).**
- **Build trust through participation.** Initiatives from the board of trustees, president, and vice presidents must go through the system. Leadership must participate in and honor the governance structure. Developing initiatives or making significant decisions outside of the adopted structure should be discouraged. If formal recommendations are rejected that decision should be supported with a written rationale. Participants in the governance structure, which should be all students, staff, and faculty must believe that their recommendations will be recognized.

# Next steps

- Identify the people charged with responsibility for the AY 2015-2016 design and implementation process.
- Prepare an audit of the committee book: what work is being done, when are committees meeting, how are they reporting?
- Identify "decision points" in process / timeline.
    - Establish a baseline, current state.
    - Reflect on and assess the process.
- Build out the governance structure based on an ACC, three constituency councils, and three functional councils, making adjustments as indicated through feedback and reflection.
- Use polling/surveying as a mechanism for ratification.
- Develop a communication strategy and governance infrastructure.
- Write constitution and bylaws.
- Create training program.
- Hold elections.