Whose Decision? What Process? Doug Bennett 10/26/03

The *Word* posed some questions for me last week about the change we are pursuing with housekeeping and about how we made decisions regarding this change. I'll speak first to governance matters in this column, and address the specific question of housekeeping in a column next week.

Since I first came to Earlham six years ago, I've urged all of us in the Earlham community to ask ourselves two important questions whenever we are thinking about governance matters: Whose decision is this to make? And through what process should the decision be made?

These are important questions because governance at Earlham is complex. Different decisions are supposed to be made by different individuals and groups, and the appropriate process is different from one kind of decision to another. In general, the Faculty make final decisions about the curriculum and other aspects of the educational program, and the President and various administrators make final decisions about matters such as hiring, the budget, and other operational matters. We also expect a number of decisions about student life to be made by students, both as individuals and as a group, largely through Earlham Student Government (ESG) and through the allocation of Student Activity Fee funds.

"Consensus" and "consultation" are two key concepts that characterize decision making at Earlham. Sometimes we ask a group to *make a decision*, as for example when the Faculty revised General Education requirements. Sometimes we ask a group to *make a recommendation*, as for example when the Budget Committee recommends a budget to the President, or when the Faculty Affairs Committee and Student Faculty Affairs Committee recommend that we hire sometime to be a member of the faculty. In both situations, we expect the group to work through *consensus* process.

Sometimes a committee makes a consensus recommendation to an administrator who is charged with making the final decision – a complex process. In such cases, the administrator is expected to take the recommendation seriously; but s/he isn't necessarily bound by the recommendation, even though arrived at through consensus. At all times, we expect all those who bear administrative responsibility to *consult* broadly and to listen carefully to what all have to say. ("Listen carefully" does not necessarily mean "do what most people prefer.") When no committee has been established by the Faculty to be consulted with, the administrator should discuss the matter with those most affected and with others who may have wisdom or expertise to offer. This latter is the case with the housekeeping situation.

How might a student (or any other newcomer) learn how we expect to make each kind of decision in the complex scheme of Earlham governance? Unfortunately, we lack a clear, authoritative statement of governance. Last spring, a committee of former clerks of the faculty produced a "Governance Working Document" that was accepted by the Faculty. It is a valuable but informal statement, and can be found on the Earlham website under Community Documents at http://webdb.earlham.edu/CommunityDox/documents/Clerks_Group_on_Governance/Fall_2003/governance.pdf. At the same meeting, the Faculty called for preparation of a Governance Manual that will be a formal, authoritative statement of our governance process. A draft of that Governance Manual should be ready for discussion in a few weeks. When we have that Governance Manual, I expect it will help prevent difficult misunderstandings about governance.

Is our governance process transparent? That's one of the questions I was asked by the *Word*. Until we have the Governance Manual, I believe, it is not as transparent as it should be. But I also think our governance processes do have an unusual degree of transparency. Students are members of most committees. Student Government leaders meet every other week with the college's senior leadership. There is a great deal of information available on our website, including the responsibilities and members of each college committee. The *Gazette* we publish each fall (also available on the website), lays out the major agenda items for the college for the coming year. Our weekly *Around the Heart* newsletter has a section on governance that provides regular updates. If you are confused or can't find an answer to a question, you can ask the Clerk of the Faculty, the Provost or the President. Face to face or via e-mail, you'll quickly get an answer about *whose decision* it is to make, and about *what process* should be used .