A recurrent action item in our reviews was the statement that the group structure underlying the Departmental governance was debilitating and unfair and should be changed. In large measure this was a reflection of at least some in the department who perceive our governance is biased. The purpose of this retreat is to begin the re-examination of our governance structure and identify those changes that will allay the fears of those who find the current structure confining and prejudiced. It is important, if we are to keep true to our democratic traditions, that all the faculty must “buy” into the governance. Without the thoughtful and cooperative involvement of everyone, we will fail. We must have a governance structure not only that everyone unreservedly accepts but also one to which everyone wholeheartedly contributes.

As current Chair and a long (really long!) time member of the department I have tried below to frame the discussion from my perspective. This is not at all meant to limit or otherwise restrict the presentation of options, but simple to have a starting place. Everyone is encouraged to participate either as an initiator of ideas or as a constructive critic.

What is our current governance structure?

Basically, we have a rotating Chair (3-year term) and a number of committees in which the real work, i.e. policy making, is done. The main power of the Chair is to appoint the committees. For example, one very important function, the merit exercise, is done not by the Chair but by the Salary Committee. A manifest problem with this procedure is that there seems to be no way to smooth out the correlation (or anti-correlation) of productivity and available merit funding both effectively and fairly. Perhaps the use of running five year averages would benefit the process.

The relatively short term of the Chair emphasizes end effects (a year on the learning curve and a year as lame duck) so that for only about 30-40% of the time an experienced leader is at the helm. Some time ago (in part to remedy this) the Physics Council was invented to harness the talent and experience existing within the entire department and, thus, to provide the Chair with a sounding board and the opinion of the department. Apparently, the difficulty with this solution was that the members of the Council appeared to represent the interests of the major groups and each member represented (and defended) the interests of his/her group constituency. With the splintering of interests and the increasingly cross disciplinary nature of our research, there are those who feel isolated and unrepresented by this structure.

What are the alternatives?
I) Scrap the Chair and select/recruit a Head.

The difference between a Head and a Chair (other than the obvious jokes) is that the Head is more or less an absolute dictator. This individual sets policy (e.g. the hiring plan) and does the merit exercise (again more or less alone). Of course, there is also the inevitable and increasing administrative load which the faculty are spared. The Head serves at the pleasure of the Dean with no term limit. This structure works very well, when an exceptional physicist and administrator is appointed Head. A more frequent outcome is that a less skilled individual is available with the obvious consequent result. This is also counter to the history and culture of the UW physics department.

or II) Modify the current structure.

One alternative would be to keep the basic democratic structure and fix those things that are “broke”. The major complaint is the “tyranny” of the large groups. One suggestion is that the Physics Council be retained but there would be but four or five members chosen from the department as a whole, regardless of group affiliation. The Council would meet twice a month (on the off weeks for Department meetings). The Council would function as the Planning Committee for the department and, as such, would be responsible for the annual evaluation and update of the department plan and formulation of the search request to be made to the department and then the Dean. Major issues affecting the department as a whole would be brought to the Council first and then to the department, if necessary. (Necessity to be determined by the Council.) Committee assignments and teaching assignments will be discussed with the Council as well, although the final authority must remain with the Chair. The downside is that the average administrative/committee load of the average member would increase. If this is to be successful, Council members must attend most meetings.

Two possible techniques of selection of the Council members are given below. The elections would be by written ballot. One potential modification might be that the previous Chair be a member ex officio. In this case the elected council could be either four or five, (say N).

1) Election of the N at large. (i.e. each faculty member would have N votes and the N with the largest plurality would be elected. A simple majority of the faculty would be required for each winning candidate, so run off elections might be needed to attain this standard.

2) Election of the N from N precincts. The precincts would be chosen evenly based on alphabetically ordering of last names (e.g. 10 faculty each,N=5) for a total faculty of 50). A majority would again be required with the necessary run off elections. A Council member would be required to meet with his constituency and act as there representative and express their views.

or III) Some other suggestion. (to be presented by someone on Saturday)