

RECOMMENDATIONS OF THE GFC EXECUTIVE AD-HOC COMMITTEE ON ACADEMIC GOVERNANCE (CAG)

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UNIVERSITY
OF ALBERTA

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Foreword

The General Faculties Council of the University of Alberta is to be commended for its focus on the effectiveness of its governance. The recommendations presented in this report by the GFC Executive Ad Hoc Committee on Academic Governance (CAG) represent a positive step forward in strengthening the academic governance framework at the University of Alberta. Building on the foundational reforms of the 2017 Ad Hoc Committee, this report addresses critical questions surrounding the size, composition, and effectiveness of the General Faculties Council (GFC). It reflects a commitment to balancing representational inclusivity with deliberative capacity, ensuring that the GFC remains a robust and effective body for academic decision-making.

The key theme of this report is the enhancement of governance effectiveness through cultural and procedural improvements rather than structural changes. By maintaining the current composition of the GFC, the recommendations focus on optimizing the conditions under which the council operates. This includes fostering meaningful engagement, improving meeting logistics, clarifying roles, and strengthening governance literacy. These measures aim to reinforce the GFC's role as the university's senior academic governing body, safeguarding institutional autonomy and academic freedom while addressing challenges such as procedural drift and authority erosion.

The work of the CAG underscores the importance of academic governance as a cornerstone of institutional autonomy and academic freedom. By prioritizing deliberative depth, member engagement, and role clarity, the University of Alberta is poised to uphold its tradition of collegial governance and ensure that GFC continues to serve the best interests of the institution and its community.

CAG is composed of insightful and dedicated members, and it has been my pleasure to support their deliberations. It is my hope that the GFC continues to build on the work of CAG through the adoption of its recommendations, and through a dedicated commitment to self-reflection and continuous improvement as will be enabled by the proposed annual GFC self-evaluation survey.

Best wishes,

Cheryl Foy

Background

The work of the Committee on Academic Governance (CAG) is situated within a long trajectory of governance review at the University of Alberta. Most immediately, it follows the *Report of the Ad Hoc Committee on Academic Governance* endorsed by General Faculties Council (GFC) on April 21, 2017.¹

The 2017 Committee clarified delegated authority, restructured standing committees, strengthened collegial governance principles, and improved transparency and engagement. While those reforms were significant, they did not resolve questions of the size and composition of GFC itself. The Committee acknowledged that a body of approximately 158 members posed challenges for meaningful deliberation and identified composition review as outstanding future work.

The mandate of the present CAG arises directly from this recommendation. Building on the governance framework established in 2017, CAG was tasked with examining GFC's composition, effectiveness, and functioning in light of the *Post-secondary Learning Act* (PSLA),² comparative evidence, institutional history, and contemporary governance expectations.

1. Governance Context: Bicameral Academic Governance in Canada

Canadian universities operate within a bicameral governance framework that divides authority between governing boards and senior academic governing bodies (typically Senates or General Faculties Councils). This structure emerged from early twentieth-century governance reforms designed to balance public accountability, institutional autonomy, and academic self-governance.³

Within this framework, Boards of Governors exercise fiduciary oversight and institutional stewardship, while academic governing bodies hold primary authority over academic policy, programs, admissions, curriculum, and standards

¹ University of Alberta General Faculties Council, *Report of the Ad Hoc Committee on Academic Governance Including Delegated Authority* (Edmonton: University of Alberta, 2017), endorsed April 21, 2017.

² See *Post-secondary Learning Act*, Revised Statutes of Alberta 2000, c P-19 (Province of Alberta), ss. 16-19, 23-26 (hereinafter, PSLA)

³ University of Toronto. *Report of the Royal Commission on the University of Toronto*. Toronto: King's Printer, 1906. Glen A. Jones, Theresa Shanahan, and Paul Goyan, "The Academic Senate and University Governance in Canada," *Canadian Journal of Higher Education* 34, no. 2 (2004): 35–68.

(subject to statutory limits).⁴ Institutional legitimacy depends on both bodies exercising authority within their respective jurisdictions.

Governance scholarship consistently links strong academic governance to institutional autonomy. Effective academic governing bodies scrutinize academic decision-making, uphold academic standards, and buffer institutions from external political or market pressures.⁵ Conversely, where academic bodies function procedurally rather than deliberatively, authority may shift toward executive and external actors, raising concerns about the erosion of collegial governance.⁶

2. Academic Governance and the Protection of Academic Freedom

The Canadian Association of University Teachers defines academic freedom as encompassing freedom in teaching, research, publication, institutional service, and the right to critique one's institution without reprisal.⁷

Academic freedom is sustained through governance arrangements that ensure academic matters are determined through collegial processes rather than unilateral administrative authority.⁸ Academic governing bodies are the institutional mechanisms through which the academic community collectively exercises authority over curriculum, standards, academic hiring policy, research policy, and scholarly integrity.⁹

Robust academic self-governance is widely understood to be a structural precondition for academic freedom.¹⁰ When academic governing bodies are

⁴ Glen A. Jones, Theresa Shanahan, and Paul Goyan, "The Academic Senate and University Governance in Canada," *Canadian Journal of Higher Education* 34, no. 2 (2004): 35–68; Laura Pennock, Glen A. Jones, Julia-Maria Leclerc, and S. X. Li, *Challenges and Opportunities for Collegial Governance at Canadian Universities* (Toronto: Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario, 2016); Foy, Cheryl. *An introduction to University Governance* (cps), 120-126. Irwin UTP, 2021

⁵ Jones, Shanahan & Goyan (2004) and Pennock et al. (2016).

⁶ Schroeder, Marc. "The academic governance body: What's its role and who decides?." *Review of Education, Pedagogy, and Cultural Studies* 46, no. 2 (2024): 276-294.

⁷ Canadian Association of University Teachers (CAUT), *CAUT Policy Statement on Academic Freedom* (Ottawa: CAUT, 2011, rev. 2025)..<https://www.caut.ca/policy-statements/academic-freedom/>. Collective Agreement between The Governors of the University of Alberta and The Association of the Academic Staff of the University of Alberta, July 1, 2024 to June 30, 2028, article 3.

⁸ Berdahl, Robert. "Academic freedom, autonomy and accountability in British universities." *Studies in higher education* 15, no. 2 (1990): 169-180.

⁹ James Duff, and Robert O. Berdahl, *University Government in Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1966).

¹⁰ See CAUT (2011, rev. 2025).

weakened, authority over academic matters may shift toward executive or external actors, with corresponding implications for autonomy and freedom.¹¹

3. Legislative Framework: Statutory Basis of GFC Composition

The statutory composition and authority of General Faculties Council (GFC) are established under Alberta's *Post-secondary Learning Act* (PSLA).

Section 23 requires each university to maintain a General Faculties Council composed of *ex officio* academic leaders, elected academic staff representatives, statutory student members, and additional appointed members drawn from staff and students.

While the core *ex officio*, elected academic, and statutory student categories are fixed in legislation, Sections 23(d) and 25 permit the appointment of additional members in numbers determined by the statutory membership.

This legislative flexibility has enabled institutions to expand representation over time. Most notably, University of Alberta students were given parity with academic staff in 1971. Questions of size and composition can therefore be seen as reflecting institutional governance choices, as well as statutory design.

4. Institutional Governance History and Student Parity

The current composition of GFC reflects decades of institutional evolution shaped by representational reform, governance democratization, and equity commitments. Across Canadian universities, governance reforms in the 1960s and 1970s expanded participation by faculty and students in response to calls for transparency and collegial accountability.¹² Within this broader movement, GFC strengthened student participation in academic governance.

The establishment of student parity principles was among the most consequential developments, embedding students as structural participants in academic governance rather than symbolic observers.¹³

In subsequent decades, additional appointed categories were introduced, including professional staff, librarians, academic teaching staff, and cross-

¹¹ Schroeder (2024)

¹² Commission on University Government in Canada, *University Government in Canada*, 12–15; Jones, Shanahan, and Goyan, "Academic Senate and University Governance in Canada," 40–42.

¹³ University of Alberta General Faculties Council, *Report of the Ad Hoc Committee on Student Representation, 1971*; R. Macleod, *All Things True: A History of the University of Alberta, 1908 to 2008*, (Edmonton, University of Alberta Press, 2008)

appointed administrative representatives. These changes reflect institutional growth and complexity and the desire to broaden representational inclusivity.

The cumulative effect of incremental expansion has been a substantial increase in overall council size beyond statutory baselines.¹⁴ Contemporary composition debates must therefore be understood within this longer institutional history.

5. Comparative Composition Data: U15 and Canadian Senate Benchmarks

Comparative benchmarking provides important context for assessing GFC's structure.

Analysis of Canadian U15 institutions indicates that the University of Alberta's GFC is 50 percent larger than the median U15 academic Senate. Further review shows that:

- Appointed staff membership is approximately double the national median.
- Student membership is 2.5 times the national median.

Peer institutions, including the University of Toronto, University of British Columbia, McGill University, Queen's University, and the University of Calgary, generally maintain smaller GFC equivalents. Comparative governance research suggests that while broad membership enhances legitimacy, large academic bodies face structural constraints on deliberation and engagement.¹⁵

6. Size, Committee Systems, and Deliberative Function

Internal governance reviews echo these findings.

With approximately 158 members, GFC faces practical constraints on sustained plenary debate. As membership has expanded, substantive academic review has increasingly shifted to standing committees. While this model enables detailed examination, it may reduce the capacity of the full council to function as the University's central academic deliberative forum.

7. Mandate–Performance Gaps in Academic Governance

National research identifies broader effectiveness challenges across Canadian academic Senates. Survey data reveal persistent gaps between senators' understanding of their responsibilities and their perceptions of senate performance.¹⁶ Majorities believe senates should review institutional

¹⁴ The minimum size of our GFC according to the PSLA is 88 members

¹⁵ Pennock et al., "Collegial Governance," 18–21; Jones, Shanahan, and Goyan, "Academic Senate," 49–52.

¹⁶ Pennock et al., "Collegial Governance," 18–21; Jones, Shanahan, and Goyan, "Academic Senate," 49–52.

performance and defend autonomy, yet fewer perceive these functions as being effectively fulfilled.

8. Participation, Engagement, and Governance Processes

The CAG review identified engagement and process design as central determinants of governance effectiveness.

Committee discussion and consultation findings highlighted agenda congestion, limited debate time, presentation-heavy meetings, and late distribution of materials as barriers to the deliberative function of GFC. Governance scholarship similarly emphasizes the importance of governance training/orientation and deliberative design as foundational for effectiveness.¹⁷

9. Role Clarity, Orientation, and Governance Authority

Role clarity also emerged as a critical governance issue.

Scholars note persistent confusion within academic governing bodies regarding whether they function as statutory decision-making authorities or consultative forums.¹⁸ Academic governing bodies are frequently treated as “town halls,” diluting deliberative authority.

Governance effectiveness requires members to act as institutional decision-makers exercising independent academic judgment. Role confusion may manifest in excessive deference to administrative authority, and representational advocacy, as well as, to limited scrutiny of proposals.

Structured orientation and governance education are therefore essential supports. The CAG committee discussions emphasized the need for expanded orientation resources to reinforce members’ deliberative role.

¹⁷ Pennock et al., *Collegial Governance*, 27–31; Foy, page #

¹⁸ Foy, page 10-13

Analysis

The legislative, historical, comparative, and consultative evidence reviewed in this report does not point to a structural deficiency in GFC. Rather, it reveals a set of interacting pressures that shape governance effectiveness.

1. Representation and Deliberative Capacity

GFC's current composition reflects deliberate historical commitments to representational inclusivity, including the institutionalization of student parity and the expansion of appointed categories over time. However, comparative benchmarking demonstrates that GFC is substantially larger than peer U15 senates. Governance research indicates that while broad membership can enhance legitimacy and inclusivity, large deliberative bodies face structural constraints: diffusion of responsibility, limited speaking opportunities, compressed debate time, agenda congestion, and increased reliance on committee systems.

The analysis suggests not a failure of representational principle, but a tension between two governance goods:

- representational breadth
- deliberative depth

The challenge is not whether inclusivity is appropriate, but whether current structures optimize deliberative function.

2. Mandate-Performance Gaps and Procedural Drift

National survey data reveal persistent gaps between senators' understanding of their formal authority and their perceptions of senate performance. This pattern aligns with concerns raised in the 2017 GFC review regarding engagement and authority.

Where academic governing bodies function primarily as approval mechanisms (reviewing proposals late in development and operating under compressed timelines) deliberative capacity may erode. Over time, this can normalize procedural governance rather than substantive academic scrutiny.

Importantly, no evidence suggests that GFC lacks formal authority. Rather, the issue is one of *operationalization*: whether structural and procedural conditions enable members to exercise that authority effectively.

3. Role Clarity, Governance Literacy, and Authority Erosion

The literature and consultation identify role confusion as a central barrier to effectiveness. When members understand GFC primarily as a forum for expression and the representation of constituencies rather than a statutory decision-making body, governance culture shifts.

This shift has two implications:

1. Members may approach issues as representatives advocating constituency positions rather than as institutional decision-makers exercising collective academic judgment about the best interests of the University of Alberta.
2. Executive actors may gradually assume greater *de facto* authority where academic governance bodies are perceived as procedural.

This dynamic does not necessarily arise from formal delegation, but from cultural and procedural forces. In such contexts, academic authority may consolidate informally within executive offices or administrative structures.

Strengthening governance orientation, clarifying roles, and reinforcing members' responsibility to exercise independent academic judgment therefore function as safeguards against authority erosion.

4. Academic Freedom and Institutional Autonomy

Academic freedom is rooted in governance arrangements that ensure academic matters are determined through collegial processes rather than unilateral administrative authority.

When academic governing bodies are deliberatively weak, whether due to size, procedural congestion, or role confusion, institutional autonomy may be indirectly affected. Conversely, strengthening governance literacy, engagement practices, and deliberative norms reinforces the structural conditions that sustain academic freedom.

The analysis thus links governance effectiveness not merely to administrative efficiency, but to the normative commitments underlying bicameral governance.

Synthesis

Taken together, the evidence suggests:

- While GFC's size may contribute to deliberative constraints, its representational structure reflects historical commitments and making substantive changes faces practical challenges opposing representational breadth.
- Cultural and procedural factors significantly shape governance effectiveness.
- Authority erosion is more likely to occur through informal drift than formal statutory change.
- Enhanced engagement practices, governance literacy, deliberative design, and institutional understanding of academic authority may offer high-leverage improvements without structural upheaval.

Accordingly, the recommendations that follow do not propose changes to the composition of GFC. Instead, they focus on strengthening the conditions under which the existing governance framework can operate effectively, reinforcing GFC's role as the university's senior academic governing body and safeguarding the institutional autonomy and academic freedom embedded within bicameral governance.

Recommendations

The GFC Executive Ad-Hoc Committee on Academic Governance (CAG) recommends that General Faculties Council (GFC):

GFC Composition

1. Maintain the current GFC composition, as outlined in the GFC Terms of Reference.
2. Support student member engagement by:
 - a. delegating to the University of Alberta Students' Union ("UASU") the authority to apportion seats for appointed elected undergraduate students, with the expectation that any changes to reapportionment of undergraduate seats must have at least one elected student seat allocated to each Faculty; and
 - b. modifying the term start and end dates for appointed elected undergraduate and graduate student members to align with term dates for other appointed GFC members, from July 1 to June 30, to take effect for the 2026-2027 academic year.

Meeting Logistics and Format

3. Reinforce the guiding principles outlined in the GFC Governance Framework (the “Framework”) to “facilitate meaningful engagement while maintaining efficient and effective decision-making processes” by:
 - a. endorsing proposed guidelines for GFC agenda planning, materials development and distribution, and presentations, as set out in the materials before GFC;
 - b. approving proposed revisions to Section 11.2 of the Framework as set out in the materials before GFC, intended to improve the quality of deliberations at GFC meetings by holding speakers to a reasonable timeframe during the meeting, allowing the Chair to expedite the point(s) being made where appropriate, to ensure adequate time is allotted for topics of consideration and avoid continual statement of the same topics;
 - c. approving proposed revisions to Section 2.1 of Appendix 17A to the Framework, GFC Roles and Responsibilities of Members, to encourage in-person meeting attendance, and, where in-person attendance is not possible, to make allowances for virtual attendance for members of the GFC and its committees; and
 - d. directing University Governance to develop orientation and educational resources to support members’ understanding and use of question period.

Process & Policy Engagement

4. Endorse the use of the [University of Alberta Student Participation Process Handbook](#), already referenced on the Governance Outline template, as a tool and resource to support governance consultation processes, particularly related to university policy changes that come before GFC and its committees for consideration and decision.
5. As outlined in Section 3.2 of the Framework’s Appendix 17C *Principles for General Faculties Council Delegation of Authority* (the “Principles”), and to demonstrate committees’ diligence related to their mandates and delegated authority, encourage GFC Committee Chairs to communicate with GFC a committee’s deliberations in considering and recommending a GFC decision item.
6. Reinforce direction within the GFC *Roles and Responsibilities* of Members that requires members to meaningfully participate and engage in governance discussions through advanced preparation and active inquiry into proposals brought before GFC and its committees.

Culture & Effectiveness

7. Uphold the guiding principles set out in Sections 1.2 (a), (b)iii, (b)v, and (b)vii of the Framework by reminding university leadership of the importance and value of member engagement in discussions at meetings of GFC and its committees, encouraging proponents to be prepared for and supportive of member questions and debate.
8. Approve proposed additions to the GFC Roles and Responsibilities of Members, as set out in the materials before GFC, that formalize the ongoing evaluation of GFC by establishing an annual GFC self-evaluation survey to provide insight into members' experiences and perspectives on the health and effectiveness of academic governance at the University of Alberta.
9. Direct University Governance to refine GFC orientation and educational resources to better illustrate GFC's mandate within the University of Alberta's shared governance model, providing members with the necessary tools to build their understanding of GFC's statutory authority over academic affairs under the Post-Secondary Learning Act and its essential role in the institutional decision-making process.
10. Encourage member attendance at in-person orientation and engagement sessions, where possible, in recognition that individuals' physical presence and active participation is essential to the development of trust and camaraderie between members, as well as a positive and collaborative GFC culture.

Respectfully submitted:

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Appendices

Appendix A	Recommendations of the GFC Executive Ad Hoc Committee on Academic Governance (for approval)
Appendix B	Revised GFC Governance Framework (for approval)
Appendix C	Guidelines: GFC Agendas, Materials & Presentations
Appendix D	Bibliography of the committee's readings