

Reclaiming your Senate

A primer on pre-Senate caucuses

A University Governance Committee resource

January 2024

OCUFA

Ontario Confederation of University Faculty Associations
Union des associations des professeurs des universités de l'Ontario

Reclaiming your Senate: A primer on pre-Senate caucuses

Version: January 19, 2024

What are pre-Senate caucuses?

Pre-Senate caucuses are either formal or informal meetings organized to discuss the agenda prior to Senate. Some have been created at the faculty council level, but the majority have been organized by members of the Association, often as a response to issues of administrative overreach and/or concerns about collegial governance. Additional associations started pre-Senate meetings after the financial and governance debacle at Laurentian University and others have been created in the wake of a labour action. The purpose of pre-Senate caucuses is to facilitate broader engagement and inform Senators in the process of collegial governance, to prepare more substantively for Senate meetings, and to organize and coordinate questions effectively.

The university Senate is a key decision-making space within the bicameral governance structure of an institution. Senates are responsible for the university's academic policy, including admission and graduation standards, program content and curricula, and upholding the academic integrity of a university, amongst other aspects. An effective, well-organized pre-Senate caucus can help ensure all university stakeholders' voices are properly represented.

How many Associations have one?

At the time of the 2022 survey done by the OCUFA University Governance Committee, there were 8 (out of 18 returned surveys) Associations who replied that they have active pre-Senate caucuses, which is a noticeable increase from the 2018 survey wherein 2 Associations reported active pre-Senate caucuses. When asked about some of the challenges that Associations face in organizing around Senate, the primary issue has been the time and effort it takes to organize, prepare, and meet prior to Senate meetings, as well as securing someone to chair and plan the meetings.

Why pre-Senate caucuses?

Faculty Senators have an obligation to communicate Senate issues with their constituents. While faculty members should have the opportunity to be informed by their Senate representatives about Senate issues, this commonly occurs *after* Senate meetings, if at all. Ideally, faculty members are apprised of upcoming Senate agenda items *prior* to Senate meetings. In this way, faculty members and their Senator counterparts have an opportunity to discuss existing and potential agenda items in advance of Senate meetings and to make Senate meetings more productive from the faculty perspective.

Pre-Senate caucuses create greater awareness among colleagues, facilitate meaningful and open discussions, support colleagues at Senate, generate productive and collegial Senate meetings, and reduce/redistribute the workload of Senators. In practical terms, this means emphasizing the following objectives:

- revitalize and re-democratize Senate;
- broaden faculty participation;
- champion faculty issues and concerns;
- generate meaningful and inclusive discussion;
- demand accountability of the Administration (ensure it is not a rubber stamp for the Administration);
- provide orientation for Senate members; and,
- promote collaboration among Senators across different areas of the University.

What role does your Association and its representatives have?

Many pre-Senate caucuses are chaired by a representative from the Association, largely because the Association often takes the initiative in organizing the caucus. There is nothing preventing another faculty representative, such as the speaker/deputy speaker, from playing this role, but it would be inappropriate for a member of the University Administration to play this role. The caucus is typically representative of the ‘rank and file’ members of the collegium, who are usually composed of faculty, staff, and students.

Of course, faculty members are often union members and, for others in the caucus, participation likely would be determined by one’s membership in a formal employee or student group. In this context, questions may be raised about the possibility of labour relations business implicitly or explicitly motivating the proceedings of a pre-Senate caucus. To answer this concern, it should be kept in mind that the pre-Senate caucus is typically facilitated by the Association but does not formally report to it.

It is important to remember that members of the University Administration face the same possible “conflict of interest” in terms of their roles as well. In reality, Associations play a major role in defending collegial rights and in defending the role of the collegial bodies in university governance, often in opposition to managerial encroachment. Hence, the Association’s role signals their interest in strengthening collegial governance in a way that depends upon opportunities for organized deliberation and consultation that would not be possible without a body like a pre-Senate caucus.

Pre-Senate caucuses that are run by Associations provide a golden opportunity for the Association to engage with a ready-made constituency of its members from across the institution. While issues that may come before Senate could divide faculty, the member engagement that is possible through pre-Senate caucuses can help bring faculty together, even if the only common theme is the aim of improving collegial governance. Hence, pre-Senate caucuses have the potential to build power within the Association.

Who should participate?

While there is no standard rule applying to every institution and circumstance, a pre-Senate caucus is typically composed of members of non-Administrator employee and student

groups with participation rights in Senate. It can be organized as a “multi-stakeholder” group, even if one group, such as the Association, may take the lead in calling meetings and keep and update membership lists. It is advisable to formalize the composition of the caucus in order to ensure predictability as leadership and organizational responsibilities are passed on.

The pre-Senate caucus meetings can be open to all non-Administrator faculty, Association committee members (e.g., Governance, Finance), or just faculty Senators and faculty representatives on Senate subcommittees or the Board of Governors. There is a spectrum of practices for inclusion of other constituencies, for example, student or staff Senators.

Contract faculty often do not have participation rights in Senate. They need a voice because of the critical role they play in teaching large numbers of students, the service work they provide, and the increasing numbers of contract faculty at most institutions. Contract faculty who serve on Association committees or are voting representatives in their Department or Faculty Councils are ideal invitees to pre-Senate meetings.

Given the multiple, structural barriers to contract faculty participation in Senate. OCUFA’s University Governance Committee’s 2022 report, [Strategies for Enhancing Collegial Governance](#), outlines ten recommendations for including contract faculty in governance spaces. Contract faculty participation in collegial governance bodies is vital and must be a priority.

How do you get a pre-Senate caucus started or organized?

Crises, like a pandemic or strike, can prompt faculty members to unite to ensure the collective success of their employment and academic programs amidst uncertainty. Collaborating on issues that should arise at Senate—whether from a crisis or not—is an approach that is inherent to academics and promotes collegiality.

Pre-Senate caucuses may be informally or formally structured and can be organized in various ways. They may occur across Faculties, or be organized via the Association, and can occur in person or online. They may occur regularly or intermittently, for example, when special circumstances arise. For instance, faculty Senators may reach out to each other to meet informally prior to Senate meetings to discuss university-wide or Faculty-specific agenda items.

Pre-Senate caucuses may be organized by the Association's Governance Committee (which may have Senator and Board of Governor faculty representatives) or President.

For more information or advice, reach out to OCUFA’s University Governance Committee.

How do you maintain its vitality and effectiveness (aka best practices)?

The function and objectives of pre-Senate caucus meetings should be made clear from the start. To ensure regular attendance, the meetings should be productive and respectful. Participants should be made aware that the meetings are non-partisan and that different viewpoints are welcome.

Depending on when the agenda is sent to Senators, the pre-Senate caucus should try to schedule meetings between the date of the agenda being released and the date of the Senate meeting. Using the same meeting time may not work for all members so alternating the schedule might allow for more Senators to participate.

Another means by which faculty Senators can broaden faculty awareness about Senate issues is to reach out to non-Senator faculty members when particularly serious issues are coming up at Senate and encourage them to attend as an act of solidarity with their fellow faculty Senators. Additionally, pre-Senate caucus members may consider ways to report to their constituents, either by tasking individual caucus members with speaking to their colleagues or writing a Senate report to send out to faculty members. There may be a need to have a post-Senate caucus, to discuss the events that transpired at Senate.

The structure of pre-Senate caucus meetings may vary based on the circumstances or Senate agenda, whether the meetings are formal or informal, and how they are organized (at the Faculty level or run by the Association). The meetings can be designed as a guided discussion based on the upcoming Senate agenda and other items that could and perhaps should be discussed at Senate.

Actionable outcomes of the meetings may include:

- gathering questions or motions to submit in advance of the next Senate meeting, including new initiatives (such as proposals for new Senate committees or procedures);
- agreement on a strategic focus of questions to raise from the floor during the next Senate meeting;
- agreement on the Senators who will persist in asking questions when the Administration deflects;
- agreement on whether a motion will be put forward to ask for a secret ballot for a motion that arises;
- organizing subcommittees or assignments based on specific topics from an upcoming Senate agenda, such as considering possible candidates to nominate for elections; and
- future plans to help distribute the reading workload of Senators for upcoming Senate meetings.

Undertaking even one of these items can make your pre-Senate caucuses effective spaces for faculty Senators to engage and take action on important agenda items.

Conclusion

Senate is one of the key forums in which collegial governance should occur. Therefore, it is incumbent on all faculty (including on behalf of contract faculty) to take every opportunity to make Senate work effectively and with collective academic interests in mind. Those who hold pre-Senate caucuses have reported that their Senate meetings have been more robust and engaging with more active participation by faculty Senators. In short, faculty-led pre-Senate caucuses can be instrumental in maximizing the potential of Senate.