

**REPORT OF TASK FORCE ON GFC  
REFORMS**

**JULY 31st, 2014**

## SECTION 1: INTRODUCTION

The Draft White Paper on General Faculties Council (GFC) Reforms (White Paper) was issued by the Office of the President of the University of Alberta on June 10, 2013.

The White Paper states that “[i]n order to ensure that the GFC system is functioning effectively and efficiently, GFC should undertake a review of all of its committees and the overall GFC structure.” The White Paper called for the President, in her capacity as Chair of GFC, to strike a small Task Force “to conduct an independent review of the Terms of Reference and activities of each committee and provide recommendations for reform.” The Task Force consists of two faculty members, a graduate student, and an undergraduate student who have relevant academic and/or professional backgrounds and expertise in governance. The Task Force members are: Professor Randall Morck, Stephen A. Jarislowsky Distinguished Chair in Finance and University Professor, Faculty of Business; Professor Linda C. Reif, CN Professor of International Trade, Faculty of Law; Ms. Susan Cake, PhD student, Department of Sociology; and Ms. Caitlin Bullerkist, BA student, Department of Political Science.

The White Paper states that:

“The GFC Task Force will objectively review GFC committees’ structure and activities, and the evolution of these, as compared to each committee’s terms of reference, and the PSLA [*Post-Secondary Learning Act*]. Specifically, the GFC Task Force will examine:

1. Each GFC committee’s Terms of Reference to ensure that the terms of reference are up-to-date and reflect University policies and the PSLA, but also the current operations of each committee.
2. Each committee’s activities to ensure that they are focused on governance issues relevant to that committee, and not activities that are the responsibility of other committees or administrative offices.
3. The alignment of the committees to identify duplication and/or gaps in committee activities, as it relates to the governance pathways within GFC committees.”

The Task Force interprets the terms of the White Paper to indicate a focus on GFC committees. However, the White Paper also instructs us to look at “the overall GFC structure”.

The original process and completion timelines contained in the White Paper were revised due to the pressing budgetary situation faced by the University of Alberta over the spring and summer of 2013. As a result, the Task Force was set up in the 2013 Fall semester and started work on October 23, 2013. A document review and interviews were undertaken during the period November 2013 to March 2014, as detailed below in Section 8: Resources. The terms of reference of GFC/GFC committees are available on-line at:

## **SECTION 2: FRAMEWORK FOR THINKING ABOUT GOOD GOVERNANCE**

Governance is the process through which an organization such as a business corporation, a government ministry, or a university reaches decisions. Good governance means getting to the right decisions with acceptably few errors via a process that imposes acceptably tolerable costs. Poor governance occurs if unacceptably many wrong decisions occur or if getting to right decisions is unacceptably costly.

The future is largely unpredictable, so all organizations make decisions that turn out badly. By a wrong decision, we mean a decision that, given information readily available at the time, would have been made otherwise were the organization's goals in clear focus. Decisions can be excessively swayed by vocal or influential minorities. Decisions can be too rash when they are made with inadequate gathering or processing of information. Insufficiently transparent decisions, even if entirely correct, can fail on implementation for want of "buy-in". The costs of such problems are the costs of errors in the decision-making process.

But exhaustive consultation, protracted contemplation, strained debate, and pointlessly detailed transparency are also expensive. Excessively lengthy decision-making can let valuable opportunities slip away. Meaningful engagement in governance requires an expenditure of time and effort to gather information, distinguish the relevant from the irrelevant, formulate and weigh alternatives, and attend meetings. The time and effort so spent have an "opportunity cost": the time and effort that otherwise would have been spent acquiring new ideas, improving teaching, and advancing research. Indeed, the quality of decision-making can actually deteriorate if the governance process consumes time and effort past a certain point because people with high opportunity costs then withdraw from the governance process, taking with them whatever insights, information, and judgment they might have contributed. The costs of such problems are costs of the decision-making process itself.

Because neither error-free governance nor cost-free governance is feasible, good governance is inevitably a trade-off. Good governance balances the cost of inevitable errors against the costs of operating the decision-making process itself. This trade-off is quite likely different for different sorts of issues, and it quite likely changes substantially with time. In particular, the University of Alberta is a much larger and more complicated organization now than it was even a few decades ago, and we operate in an environment of more pressing constraints than in decades past. Decision-making processes and systems of delegation that made sense in the University of Alberta several decades ago may merit revisiting. In particular, as we discuss further below, attention might be given to formally reconsidering the terms of reference, defining the delegated

powers of GFC committees, and even the list of committees in operation.

The University of Alberta's larger size and complexity make a case for increased reliance on delegation. This is because greater organizational size and complexity increase the costs to members of GFC of becoming informed. These costs are imposed on a large number of members of a GFC necessarily grown bigger to include acceptable representation from a longer and more diverse set of constituencies. These increases in the cost of decision-making by the full body of GFC shift the balance of costs and benefits to favor more delegation in many important contexts. Various sorts of delegation can be considered.

Administrative delegation is the delegation of authority to administrative personnel to apply well-defined procedures, and is the formal justification for delegating authority in many parts of the University of Alberta. The implementation of procedures is appropriately delegated to administrators, but formulating the policies that determine which procedures are appropriate is less often subject to administrative delegation. There are inevitable grey areas – decisions that are both policy and procedure – and the cost balance described above comes into play in setting rules about who decides which grey areas are delegated. More transparent administrative decision-making, more frequent review of procedures in effect by policy-makers, and more accountable administrators make more extensive administrative delegation defensible.

Policies can, however, be subject to executive delegation. Executive delegation is the delegation of judgment calls to a decision-maker whose job is to become well informed so as to be able to make calls consistent with the broader objectives of the organization. CEOs and Prime Ministers exercise executive power. The University of Alberta's President and Provost, the Faculties' Deans, and various other senior administrators are also executive decision-makers. We devote considerable attention to selecting people to whom we delegate executive authority, and then hold them accountable for the overall outcomes over which they preside. This reflects the cost balance in that it uses the scarce time and effort of members of GFC as efficiently as possible. While the University's executive decision-makers must consult GFC or its committees where warranted, we cannot expect them to do so for every judgment call. Likewise, while we expect members of GFC to take steps to become more informed, we cannot expect them to read extensively on every issue pertinent to every judgment call. GFC committees, whose members are charged with becoming informed about specific issues only, are another form of executive delegation: the full membership of GFC trusts members of key committees to bear the costs of becoming informed so they can make judgment calls that GFC likely would have made had all its members borne the costs of becoming informed about all the issues pertinent to a decision.

The boundaries of executive delegation are even less readily definable than those of administrative delegation. The permeable boundaries of GFC committees' delegated authority over certain policy decisions are evidence of this. So are tensions over what policy decisions the University's executive decision-makers may and may not make without the consent of GFC, or which of its committees hold certain delegated policy decision-making powers.

The good governance of an evolving organization, such as a university committed to rapidly improving its research standing while delivering excellent teaching and serving the province more broadly, is necessarily a shifting balance of the costs of occasional suboptimal decisions balanced against the cost of a more comprehensive decision-making process. The grey area, in which this balance must be sought, is large and ill-defined, and the most critical grey areas now may be starkly different from those thought most critical a generation ago. Executive delegation and limits to executive delegation that made sense decades ago may be inefficient, inadequate, or superfluous given changes in the nature of the cost trade-off as events, opportunities, and constraints change with time.

### **SECTION 3: FRAMEWORK FOR GOVERNANCE AT THE UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA**

While the above principles are very general, the Task Force recognizes that their application to the University of Alberta academic governance must respect existing institutions and values. Obviously, the University's governance must be meaningfully collaborative, participatory, inclusive, and collegial. Faculty, students, administrators, administrative staff, and perhaps other constituencies, such as alumni and post-doctoral fellows, must be meaningfully involved and have effective voices in relevant decision-making. The Task Force's meetings with participants in GFC decision-making revealed no major dispute about this framework, and the Task Force therefore sees no reason for fundamental changes to these overarching institutional values.

However, the Task Force has heard – repeatedly – that some of the potential issues raised by the Office of the President of the University of Alberta in the White Paper are genuine concerns and may well be genuine problems. In particular, GFC governance may be positioned somewhat away from an optimal balance of costs and benefits as regards the following:

**Delegation** – The Task Force has heard concerns that the delegation of authority to GFC committees and subcommittees is unclear and inconsistent with both actual practice and the University's needs.

**Transparency and Simplicity** – The Task Force has also heard concerns regarding lack of transparency and simplicity. Collaborative, participatory, and inclusive governance requires high standards of transparency.

The Task Force has heard starkly conflicting evaluations of the current structure of GFC committees and subcommittees and of the speed and efficiency of the decision-making process. While some persons and constituencies expressed satisfaction with the status quo, others deemed it unreasonably slow, complex, and costly in terms of time and reduplicated effort. Where they are important, these features of university governance impede the meaningful engagement of our ever more time-pressed faculty and students, prevent the University of Alberta from engaging

with external challenges and opportunities in a timely manner, and drive up costs.

The general principles of good governance summarized above insist that all of these issues reflect a balancing of costs. An excessively simple decision-making process may be unacceptably error-prone. An excessively transparent process may run afoul of privacy legislation or impose undue costs. An excessively rigid delegation system may leave committees incapable of coping effectively with new and unanticipated issues. We believe that determining these balancing points is best left to GFC itself, and therefore restrict ourselves to highlighting places where specific imbalances may have developed over the decades.

## **SECTION 4: ISSUES REGARDING DELEGATION**

### ***A. Cases Where GFC Committee Functions May Have Diverged From Explicit Delegated Authority***

#### **i. Academic Standards Committee (ASC) and its Subcommittee on Standards (ASC SOS)**

Our review has uncovered complaints about the number of committee approvals required in moving up the academic governance committee chain. We have heard that this results in considerable workload for the faculty or other body needing academic governance approval for their new initiative, delays in obtaining the final approval, and overall inefficiencies in the governance process. The academic governance approval structure is also complicated in some cases, especially when new proposals are not run-of-the-mill subject matter, raising uncertainty as to which committee approvals are required. This raises associated issues for the Governance Office.

Excessive layers of required committee approvals are seen to be a particular problem in the area of new undergraduate and graduate program approvals. Only the roles of GFC's committees and subcommittees can be addressed by this Task Force. The full approval process begins at the department level, then passes through a faculty approval process, then goes on to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research (FGSR) in the case of graduate programs. The GFC is involved as proposals move through its Academic Standards Committee (ASC) Subcommittee on Standards (SOS), ASC itself, and GFC's Academic Planning Committee (APC). Thereafter, proposals require provincial government approval and, in some cases, approval by the Board of Governors and their committees as well. The Task Force has heard complaints that the overall process is puzzlingly Byzantine, and GFC may wish to consider rationalizing the steps under its jurisdiction.

Our review of ASC and ASC SOS suggests that some GFC committee functions have diverged from explicit delegated authority. ASC terms of reference state that:

“ASC is responsible for making recommendations and/or for providing advice to GFC, its Executive Committee, and/or the GFC Academic Planning Committee (APC) on the matters...[listed in the terms of reference], which include such areas as admissions and transfer, including admission and transfer to Faculties, admission of Open Studies students, academic standing policies and general university admission policies, and all institutional marking and grading policies and/or procedures” (section 3).

GFC has delegated some approval powers to ASC, including:

“the authority to approve proposals for the establishment of and termination of credit and non-credit certificates, regardless of the proposing academic unit. Where additional funding and/or space is required to support the offering of the proposed certificate and/or if, in the opinion of the Provost and Vice-President (Academic) (or delegate), the certificate requires Government approval, ASC would provide a recommendation on the (proposed) initiative to the GFC Academic Planning Committee (APC)” (section 3G).

Similarly, the terms of reference of ASC SOS require it:

“[t]o review and make recommendations to the GFC Academic Standards Committee (ASC) with respect to a number of issues which affect all students at the University of Alberta. These include, but are not limited to: a. examination policy, b. academic definitions, c. academic standing regulations, d. admission/transfer requirements” (section 3).

Currently, it appears that the Chair of ASC uses his/her discretion to decide whether a new proposal goes directly to ASC or has to be reviewed by ASC SOS before moving to ASC and then onwards up the approval chain.

A review of the actual decisions currently being made by ASC and ASC SOS reveals them to be deeply engaged in the design and approval of new academic programs and degrees, as well as revisions to current programs and degrees. While ASC does have explicit authority over offerings by the Faculty of Extension and certificates offered by all faculties (section 3F-G), a review of ASC’s terms of reference reveals that ASC’s explicit authority over degree programs is limited to their standards for admissions and transfers. Their courses, content, and other material characteristics are within the explicitly delegated authority of the APC, and are not obviously any concern of ASC or ASC SOS.

ASC, and therefore by extension ASC SOS, can opt to involve itself in any issues it deems appropriate by dint of the final clause, 3H, “Other Matters”, in its delegated authority. ASC and ASC SOS decisions as regards these issues are therefore not illegitimate. However, ASC is clearly acting well beyond the decision-making scope explicitly laid out its terms of reference. GFC may wish to consider regularizing ASC’s operation by formalizing the scope of its authority in these areas in a revised statement of delegated authority. If these decision-making

powers are to be explicitly delegated to ASC, GFC may wish to consider revising the statement of delegated authority for the APC to remove those decision-making powers.

The approval of new programs, and of modifications to existing programs, is one of the most important substantive tasks before GFC committees. It may be that such decisions merit more reflection than other issues before GFC committees, and that repeated presentations of the same material to ASC SOS, ASC, and APC do in fact generate better proposals. However, there is also scope for error: the presentations given to different bodies may differ as their proponents try to play to the perceived biases of each committee or subcommittee. Changes mandated by one body may conflict with those mandated by another. Changes mandated by one body may introduce problems that would have been caught by a body that previously approved the proposal.

Such potential problems, along with the reduplicated time and effort imposed on the people charged with gaining approval for new programs or changes to existing programs, suggest that GFC may wish to consider vesting a single committee with the requisite authority for program and major program change approvals, and ensuring that it contains all necessary expertise. Alternatively, two committees could be created: one dealing with undergraduate programs and the other with graduate programs. This Task Force notes that the University of Calgary has one such committee for each of undergraduate and graduate programs, apparently because the two sets of decisions require different sorts of information and expertise. If one or two new committees for program approvals are created, ASC's terms of reference might then be amended to ensure that it does not address program approvals, whereafter ASC SOS might even be found redundant and abolished.

GFC may also wish to reconsider the merits of assigning certificate approval to one committee (ASC) and new programs approvals to another (APC). The original logic of this split may be dated, and GFC may wish to reconsider differences, if any, in the sorts of expertise needed to screen certificates, as opposed to programs.

***B. Cases Where Lack of Delegated Authority and GFC Inaction Leave Issues to Administration/Administrators***

GFC's own terms of reference, enshrined in provincial legislation, are extremely broad and GFC also has broad powers of delegation. As noted above, delegation to executive and administrative decision-makers is essential in an organization as large and complex as the University of Alberta. If GFC or its committees had to be intimately involved in every such decision, the University would quite likely find itself paralyzed. Nonetheless, provincial legislation empowers GFC to assert its influence over decision-making that affects "the academic affairs of the university" subject to the jurisdiction of the Board (PSLA section 26(1)). For example, operating under the same provincial legislation, one of the University of Calgary's GFC standing committees is a Research and Scholarship Committee. The world has changed over the decades, and universities



now do things that were not even imagined when GFC's-current committee structure was put in place. Today, some areas of great importance to the academic affairs of the University of Alberta may be dealt with almost entirely by university administrators and, as a result, there may be insufficient, or insufficiently explicit, GFC committee oversight. As a result, GFC may wish to reconsider its delegation of authority to administrators in these areas from time to time.

We highlight three such areas where GFC needs to consider the explicit delegation of authority to GFC committees:

**i. Information Technology (IT)**

Computers, databases, websites, information technology (IT) support, and other aspects of IT are now major parts of the lives of faculty, administrators, and students. No current GFC committee has explicitly delegated authority to provide academic input into University of Alberta's decisions regarding IT, and committees with open-ended "Other Matters" authority have chosen not to provide such input.

It may be that many IT decisions are best left entirely delegated to executive and administrative decision-makers, but GFC may feel that such a sweeping delegation decision might better be made explicitly than by default.

If GFC chooses to become involved in IT decisions, a new GFC IT Committee, with explicitly delegated authority, might be considered. Alternatively, the retasking of an existing committee, including an appropriate reassessment of its composition, might be considered. Extensive consultation with the Office of the Vice-Provost & Associate Vice-President (Information Technology), and with students, administration, and faculty users of IT should go into such a decision.

**ii. Libraries**

Libraries have changed almost beyond recognition from what they were a generation ago. Hard copy journals are largely in storage, and most students and faculty now interact with the library system via electronic databases. This radical restructuring is ongoing, and is largely happening without serious input from GFC or GFC committees.

Should GFC choose to become involved in this IT-related metamorphosis of university libraries, and should it establish a new GFC IT Committee, that committee's explicitly delegated authority might extend to the library system. GFC might then wish to consider appropriate representation from senior librarians on such a committee. Alternatively, GFC may wish to establish a new Library Committee or retask an existing committee. Regardless, such a decision might best be taken after extensive consultation with librarians and library users – both students and faculty.

### **iii. Research**

The University of Alberta has always valued research. However, over the decades, world class research has become an ever more important part of the University's contribution to society. APC's terms of reference give it explicit jurisdiction over "any research-related issue" (section 3). Apart from APC, research is seldom, if ever, mentioned in the terms of reference of GFC committees. Research matters are seldom addressed in GFC committees, including APC. When research issues have been brought to the GFC committee framework for approvals, administrators have encountered difficulties in determining which GFC committee approvals have to be obtained.

As with IT and libraries, it may well be good governance to delegate most or all decision-making authority regarding research-related issues to well-chosen executive and administrative decision-makers. However, GFC may wish to consider making such a delegation decision explicitly, rather than by inaction. Should GFC wish to delegate authority over research-related issues to a research-focused committee, a new committee with new terms of reference might be created. Alternatively, an existing committee's terms of reference might be amended to provide it with such authority. Obviously, such decisions would invite extensive consultation with research faculty, graduate, and post-doctoral student representatives, and the Office of the Vice-President (Research). Yet another alternative is for GFC to decide, upon weighing the costs and benefits, explicitly to eschew this area of decision-making, thereby de facto delegating it to carefully chosen and highly competent administrators.

There are no doubt other areas that, by default, have ended up entirely delegated to administrative and executive decision-makers. Again, we emphasize that such delegation may well be best policy in many areas but, for those areas within the jurisdiction of GFC, it is ultimately up to GFC to decide on these issues of delegation.

#### ***C. Cases Where GFC Committees Interpret Their Terms of Reference Very Conservatively***

Our review has found that at least one committee may be interpreting its terms of reference very conservatively: the Facilities Development Committee (FDC).

##### **i. Facilities Development Committee (FDC)**

The PSLA gives GFC responsibility, subject to the authority of the Board of Governors, over "the academic affairs of the University" (section 26(1)), and provides that GFC may make recommendations to the Board of Governors on *inter alia* "academic planning", "campus planning", and "a building program" (section 26(1)(o)). Section 19 requires that the Board of Governors:

“consider the recommendations of the general faculties council, if any, on matters of academic import prior to providing for (a) the support and maintenance of the university, (b) the betterment of existing buildings, [and] (c) the construction of any new buildings the board considers necessary for the purposes of the university.”

GFC delegates essentially all of these duties to the FDC in that committee’s terms of reference.

This Task Force has heard concerns that FDC may be interpreting its terms of reference to limit discussions regarding the impact, design, construction, and use of facilities on campus. The limited interpretation may come from deliberate delegation of decision-making in these areas to other committees or to administrators. If so, the appropriate forums for such input might be clarified. GFC may also wish to consider the costs and benefits of delegating such decision-making to administrators. Concerns regarding these areas of decision-making relate to overcrowding in some departments and largely vacant buildings or floors in others, and to problems associated with student residences. Thus, GFC may wish to consider whether or not office space for graduate students, inhabitable student residences, etc. fall within its authority over the academic affairs of the university.

As noted above, we recommend that GFC and its committees appropriately delegate decision-making to qualified professionals to avoid unduly complicating and slowing the decision-making process. However, FDC’s terms of reference empower it to advise the Board of Governors whenever issues relating to the University’s physical facilities and their use arise. The Task Force is of the opinion that GFC could instruct FDC to interpret their terms of reference to include discussions concerning such issues.

#### ***D. Cases Where GFC Committee Functions Have Become Disconnected From the University of Alberta’s Needs***

Another way in which GFC and its committee structure may have become dated is in the persistence of committees whose functions, while once important and difficult, are now either readily and efficiently delegated or potentially no longer worthwhile given their costs. We cite two examples:

##### **i. Undergraduate Awards and Scholarships Committee (UASC)**

Pursuant to its terms of reference, the Undergraduate Awards and Scholarships Committee (UASC) has delegated authority from GFC to, *inter alia*:

“1. approve new undergraduate awards; 2. approve changes to any undergraduate student award already approved by GFC UASC; 3. approve the minimum value of a major award for undergraduate students, and to review that value regularly; [and] 4. approve the

minimum value of an undergraduate award administered by the Student Awards Office, and to review that value regularly” (section 3).

UASC also makes recommendations to the GFC Executive Committee (GFC Exec) “on any new policy or revisions to existing policy governing awards for undergraduate students” (section 3(6)). The GFC Exec retains the authority in its terms of reference “for making rules and regulations respecting [undergraduate] academic awards” (section 3(3)).

The Task Force has been told that the work of UASC is essentially administrative in nature. It has been described as having an underwhelming agenda. Most of the Committee’s tasks involve reviewing the terms of awards after an administrator and/or Faculty staff have already reviewed them, and then approving the awards or changes thereto. Our review also found that UASC seldom addresses policy matters.

If GFC ascertains that UASC’s administrative work can be readily and efficiently delegated, and committee members doing editorial work is not cost effective, GFC governance process could benefit from reallocating scarce committee member talent and time to other GFC committees where concentrated high-level expertise is needed. GFC may wish to consider terminating UASC. UASC’s award editing and approval functions might be delegated to administrators who have the appropriate training, with the approved terms included in consent agendas for approval by GFC Exec. GFC may wish to consider giving GFC Exec the authority to carry out the other mandates of UASC, in particular the approval of minimum values of undergraduate awards and policy-making on undergraduate awards pursuant to section 3(3) of its terms of reference.

## **ii. Committee on the Learning Environment (CLE)**

The Committee on the Learning Environment (CLE) has a mandate “that promotes an optimal learning environment in alignment with guiding documents of the University of Alberta” (section 3). GFC has delegated to the CLE the authority “[t]o recommend to the GFC Academic Planning Committee and to the GFC Executive Committee broad policy directions for excellence in teaching and learning” (section 3). The CLE can make recommendations “concerning policy matters and action matters” with respect to topics such as the implementation of the University Academic Plan with respect to teaching and learning; development and implementation of policies on teaching, learning, teaching evaluation, and recognition for teaching that promote the Academic Plan; development of policies on promotion of ongoing teaching assessment; nurturing the development of innovative and creative teaching practices; encouraging sharing and discussion of evidence on effective teaching and learning; promotion of critical reflection on the impact of broad societal changes in teaching and learning; and promotion of projects that offer unique teaching and learning opportunities that would benefit the university community (section 3).

Our review has shown that the CLE undertakes careful and insightful studies with most of this work accomplished through numerous subcommittees. However, that any of these studies correspond with matters on which GFC takes action is unclear.

GFC may wish to consider rethinking the role of the CLE. CLE may well be a necessary committee whose mandate merely needs revision to better reflect the current and changing university concerns relevant to our teaching and learning environment. Topics suggested for inclusion or enhancement in the CLE's mandate include IT as it relates to teaching and learning, the libraries system, and museums and collections. However, this risks an overly broad mandate that might overlap with a perhaps necessary new IT committee, and such overlapping jurisdictions have been found to slow the academic governance process unduly. Alternatively, GFC may wish to consider tasking the CLE with priority issues needing timely action. Yet another possibility is that temporary ad hoc committees to explore topical issues as the need arises might replace the CLE. Such ad hoc committees might be established by GFC or ad hoc subcommittees established by either GFC Exec or the APC.

## **SECTION 5: TRANSPARENCY AND SIMPLICITY**

GFC may wish to consider ways in which governance can be rendered more transparent and simpler, and kept better in step with the University of Alberta's ever changing needs. Collaborative, participatory, and inclusive governance requires high standards of transparency. When there is a lack of transparency people cannot easily comprehend the importance or implications of pending decisions, let alone how they might relate to past decisions that shaped current policies and procedures. Furthermore, people are unlikely to know how to collaborate and when to participate, and are thus unlikely to participate when the broader university community would benefit from their input. This is especially true for student representatives and new faculty representatives, both of whom often need to become meaningfully informed within very short time windows.

The Task Force makes the following suggestions for increasing transparency and simplicity of academic governance:

### ***A. Online Digital Archive***

GFC may wish to reconsider the balance of costs and benefits regarding transparency. In the past, physical constraints limited the scope for transparency. Large archives of files and bound volumes of agendas and minutes are difficult to organize, index, and use. Consequently, permanent records of much that GFC did, especially through its committees and subcommittees, are cumbersome and cursory at best. Bound volumes in a room in an administration building may well have been entirely appropriate decades ago, without modern IT and in what was then a

smaller institution, in which personal connections and memories could fill in gaps in institutional memory.

The University of Alberta may have become too large, diverse, and dynamic to do without an upgrade to its institutional memory. This is because a lack of understanding of the reasons existing policies and procedures were adopted creates a conservative bias. We avoid changing current practices because we rightly suspect that there is a good reason for those practices. But when pressed, we may well have no idea what that reason might be. We therefore err on the side of leaving well enough alone: that is, accept a conservative bias.

Electronic archives take up little space and can be searched readily, obviating the need for costly hard copy indexes and cross-indexes. This is an example of how new technology alters the cost-benefit tradeoffs that frame good governance. Given these new technological options, GFC may wish to consider establishing and maintaining an online digital archive of the work undertaken by GFC and all its committees and subcommittees that is far more extensive and complete than the information currently provided on the University of Alberta website. Such an archive should be comprehensively electronically searchable and indexed, so future generations of students, faculty, and other members of the university community can quickly and easily inform themselves about the reasons why we do things the ways we do. Obviously, the contents and accessibility of such a database would be constrained by legitimate restrictions such as privacy law.

GFC may wish to consider augmenting material currently available online with draft minutes, and official meeting files in this online archive. The Task Force has heard that, in some cases, minutes are posted so long after a meeting their exact context is forgotten. Such problems not only limit the usefulness of minutes, but also limit people's ability to spot errors and request corrections. Posting clearly marked draft minutes and meeting files could aid people who missed meetings to stay up to date in a timely fashion and help ensure accuracy of information.

Information currently provided online is on the governance page of the University of Alberta's web site at <http://governance.ualberta.ca/GeneralFacultiesCouncil.aspx>. This information is not prominent when the University of Alberta web site is accessed, and only emerges after navigating through four layers of nested web pages (University of Alberta - Faculty and Staff - Administration and Governance - University Governance). This information might be directly linked to the University home page. For example, the University of Calgary has an "Admin. and Governance" link on its home page: <http://www.ucalgary.ca/>.

### ***B. Tracking Changes in Proposals***

The Task Force has heard that minutes of GFC committees are limited in the information conveyed and that statements of issues often provide insufficiently in-depth information about the development of and changes in a proposal as it progresses through various GFC committees, and that this can lead to confusion and duplication of efforts. When a proposal must be

considered by more than one committee, one committee can be entirely unaware of what has been discussed and previously changed by another committee. This means that a proposal might be amended to meet the requirements of Committee A only to be changed again by Committee B, negating the work done by Committee A. The Task Force has also heard that proposals can be presented differently, to play to the perceived prejudices of members of different committees, and that this often goes undetected.

GFC can perhaps most readily limit such problems by improving its governance so that as many issues as possible go before only one committee, endowed with all relevant expertise. If GFC determines that approval paths through multiple committees and subcommittees are necessary, the online digital archive discussed above might at least mitigate these costs. Such an archive might also include the text of and accompanying materials for each variation of a proposal as it moves up the chain of GFC committees until it obtains final approval. This would enhance transparency and accountability in proposal development, creating greater faith in complicated multi-committee GFC processes.

### ***C. Enhanced Information Resources for New Proposals***

The Task Force has also heard complaints about the quality of information provided to individuals or groups interested in engaging with GFC and its committees. For example, some faculty and administrators responsible for formulating new program proposals worry that they are given inconsistent or muddled advice. Indeed, the Task Force has heard that such information is neither readily available nor readily comprehensible. The Provost's Office or Governance Office often step forward to provide one-on-one assistance in such cases. However, when key personnel retire or move on, the resulting institutional knowledge deficit can be costly to people needing to engage with GFC or its committees, especially new administrators or faculty and students.

GFC may wish to consider the provision of enhanced information resources on drafting new program proposals based on up-to-date templates. The information and drafting advice could then be clear, consistent, accurate, and up-to-date, and could reside in one location online so as to be readily accessible to students, faculty, and staff. GFC may also wish to work with the administration to ensure the retention of institutional knowledge regarding new program proposal drafting to assist people who are either new to the system or formulating unusually complex proposals.

## **SECTION 6: GOVERNANCE OVERSIGHT AND ACCOUNTABILITY**

GFC may wish to review the organization and oversight of the Governance Office and of administrative policies and procedures. Both have undergone a series of changes in recent years. The Task Force has heard of difficulties navigating the GFC committee chain to obtain final

approval for new proposals. Faculty, administrators, and students are often uncertain about which GFC committee to access first and where a proposal must move subsequently. GFC may wish to exercise its power to streamline and clarify these issues.

The Governance Office must also advise people seeking to engage with the Board of Governors and its committees. This dual duty is a recent imposition, and was advocated to replenish administrative support for the Board of Governors. The Task Force has heard that the allocation of responsibilities between GFC and its committees, on the one hand, and the Board of Governors and university administrative offices, on the other, can be confusing and opaque.

### ***A. Establish GFC Standing Committee on Governance***

GFC may wish to consider establishing a standing Committee on Governance, authorized to periodically revisit the terms of reference for each GFC committee and to recommend changes to maintain committee relevancy as the university environment changes. Such a committee might also consider, from time to time, proposals to alter the terms of reference of GFC committees in an effort to help them get to the correct decision as frequently as possible while imposing as low a cost as possible on all parties involved. The Committee on Governance could also periodically review the overall structure of GFC committees to determine whether new committees are needed and/or existing committees are still relevant. In all such decisions, the Committee on Governance might be tasked with comparing the costs and benefits of the existing system with those of proposed alternatives. Further, in reviewing the GFC committee approval path for new program proposals and the timeliness of the process, the Committee on Governance might undertake more extensive consultations on a confidential basis with persons who have shepherded proposals through to final approval.

As discussed further below under “Governance Office Accountability and Accessibility”, a Committee on Governance could also provide a valuable service by overseeing the University of Alberta Governance Office personnel who provide services for GFC. At present, the Governance Office lacks a clear job description and terms of reference, largely as a result of a recent reform that merged support for the Board of Governors and GFC into one office without clearly designating that office’s position in the chain of command.

This means that the Governance Office is left to interpret their role as they choose. In practice, as noted above, this may often have resulted in a conservative bias. Fearful of providing “wrong” advice, the Governance Office quite understandably may begin to err on the side of unduly cautious advice, recommending excessively cumbersome and lengthy pathways. This entirely rational response to ambiguous responsibility obviously imposes costs on the rest of the University. A GFC Committee on Governance could remedy this problem by providing clear instructions to the Governance Office as regards engaging with GFC and its committees and subcommittees.



## ***B. Governance Office Accountability and Accessibility***

As noted above, the Governance Office lacks a clear chain of command and has been moved from place to place in the university's administrative chain of accountability in recent years. GFC may wish to consider how to stabilize the position of the Governance Office so as to give it a clear accountability to GFC. Recent reforms have shifted its accountability variously to the President, the Provost, and the University Secretary. Obviously, the Governance Office, as currently constituted, needs sufficient autonomy to serve both the Board of Governors and GFC and its committees. GFC may wish to consider splitting the Governance Office into two separate units or bodies so that it is easier to create an accountability relationship between GFC, or its Committee on Governance, and those Governance Office staff who provide services for GFC and its committees. The unification of support for the Board of Governors and GFC into the current Governance Office saved roughly one administrative position, and providing the Governance Office with clear instructions, duties, and accountability may be worth the money.

GFC may wish to consider making the Governance Office more accessible to faculty and students needing information about the GFC committee structure and how to navigate it. Accessibility might be improved through various practices. For example, brief periods might be set aside before GFC and/or GFC committee meetings for people to ask Governance staff questions relevant to the meeting and committee process. Other examples are discussed in more detail in the sections below on “Online Delegation Resource”, “Governance 101”, and “Statements of Issues”.

## ***C. Online Delegation Resource***

The Task Force has heard that it is difficult to determine the extent of GFC’s delegation of authority to various GFC committees, making it difficult to understand the overall governance structure, the routing for approval of proposals, and the extent of the authority of each committee.

GFC may wish to consider creating an online delegation resource. This resource might outline the sources, dates, and chains of the delegations of authority for issue areas that GFC deems appropriate. The delegation resource might also include descriptions of the authority delegated to senior administrative officers such as the President, Provost, or other senior administrative officers. Further, such a delegation resource might more clearly highlight linkages between UAPPOL policies and procedures that speak to areas within the terms of reference of GFC and its committees.

### ***D. Governance 101***

Governance 101 is currently the main orientation offered to those new to University governance. The orientation places equal emphasis on the Board of Governors, Deans Council, and the GFC and its committee structure. The orientation is more an introductory overview of governance rather than how to navigate the committee pathways and how to engage with GFC and its committees. GFC may wish to revise Governance 101 to increase its benefits for new student and faculty representatives. Consideration might also be given to increasing the frequency of Governance 101 presentations tailored to new faculty and students serving as GFC or GFC committee members.

### ***E. Statements of Issues***

Statements of issues are currently written by those who are presenting proposals before committees. This could lead to proposals having an inherent bias and a failure to provide an objective and complete overview. A more comprehensive and readily electronically searchable online record of the debate surrounding current and past proposals might let GFC and committee members better appreciate alternative perspectives and provide constructive criticism by better interpreting current proposals in light of past records.

### ***F. Committee Scheduling and Agenda Deadlines***

Currently the deadline for getting proposals on the meeting agendas of GFC or its committees is two weeks in advance of the meeting. This can create difficulties for people needing to move a proposal through multiple tightly scheduled committee meetings. Where multiple committee approvals are deemed cost-effective and therefore good governance, GFC may wish to consider shortening the two week advance notice for meeting agenda items and scheduling committee meetings to increase the speed of proposals through the GFC committee governance pathway. However, as mentioned above, GFC might preclude most such situations from arising in the first place by reorganizing its committees so, wherever possible, a single committee contains all necessary expertise to approve or deny a proposal.

## **SECTION 7: SUGGESTED NEXT STEP**

The Task Force consists of two faculty members, a graduate student, and an undergraduate student. Obviously it is not fully representative of the constituent groups that comprise GFC. Accordingly, the Task Force has structured its report to provide broad suggestions to the President in her capacity as Chair of GFC on reforming GFC committees and the overall GFC structure. The Task Force suggests that further review and the final decisions on GFC committee

reform and overall GFC structural reform be undertaken by a body with a membership broadly representative of all GFC constituent groups. This body might be established by GFC in the form of an ad hoc committee or task force.

## **SECTION 8: RESOURCES**

### **Interviews:**

Colleen Skidmore, Chair, Facilities Development Committee, January 29, 2014

Marion Haggarty-France, University Secretary, February 4, 2014

Garry Bodnar, Secretary to GFC and Director of GFC Services, February 4, 2014

Andrea Patrick, Assistant Secretary to GFC, February 4, 2014

Katalin Bimbo, Chair, Undergraduate Awards and Scholarships Committee, February 6, 2014

Bill Connor, Chair, Academic Standards Committee/ASC Sub-Committee on Standards, February 12, 2014

Bill Connor, Chair, Committee on the Learning Environment, February 12, 2014

Dustin Chelen, Students' Union Vice-President Academic, February 12, 2014

Adam Woods, Students' Union Vice-President External, February 12, 2014

Von Whiting, Senior Administrative Officer, Office of the Provost, February 18, 2014

Sandra Kereliuk, Senior Administrative Officer, Vice President (Finance and Administration), February 18, 2014

Mary Paul, Senior Administrative Officer, Vice President (Facilities and Operations), February 18, 2014

Katharine Moore, Senior Administrative Officer, Vice President (Research), February 18, 2014

Charleen Schmidt, Senior Administrative Officer, Vice President (Advancement), February 18, 2014

Andrea Smith, Senior Administrative Officer, Vice President (University Relations), February 18, 2014

Gwen Bauer, Manager, Policy Standards Office, February 18, 2014

Elizabeth Le, Chair, University Teaching Awards Committee, February 26, 2014

Carl G. Amrhein, Chair, Academic Planning Committee and Chair, GFC Executive Committee (President's delegate), March 10, 2014

Steven Penney, Chair, Campus Law Review Committee, March 18, 2014

Brent Epperson, Graduate Students' Association President, March 20, 2014

Colin More, Graduate Students' Association, Vice-President Academic, March 20, 2014

Lisa Collins, University Registrar, March 21, 2014

Ellen Schoeck, Executive Director of Graduate Students' Association, former Secretary to GFC, March 27, 2014

### **Written Comments Solicited/Received From:**

Deans of all Faculties (or delegated Associate Deans)

President Indira Samarasekera in her capacity as Chair, GFC

Carol Byrne, Former University Registrar

### **Legislation:**

*Post-Secondary Learning Act*, S.A. 2003, c. P-19.5

*Alberta Public Agencies Governance Act*, S.A. 2009, c. A-31.5

### **University of Alberta Documents:**

Terms of reference of GFC and GFC Standing Committees

Minutes and Agendas of GFC and GFC Standing Committees from September 2010 to March 2014

Executive Position Descriptions for President and Vice-Presidents

University of Alberta (Marion Haggarty-France), *U-15 Governance Report* (January 27, 2012)

Students' Union, Working Draft of *A Reflection on the State of Academic Governance at the University of Alberta* (as of February 12, 2014)

### **Other:**

Draft White Paper on General Faculties Council Reforms (June 10, 2013)

University of Calgary, *Report of the Task Force to Review GFC and the GFC Standing Committees* (March 15, 2012)

Lea Pennock et al, *Academic Senates and University Governance in Canada: Changes in Structure and Perceptions of Senate Members* (September 2012)

Lea Pennock et al, *Canadian University Senates Project: A Summary for the University of Alberta* (January 2013)

Various university governance web sites, including University of Calgary governance web site, see e.g. <http://www.ucalgary.ca/> (“Admin. and Governance” link); [www.ucalgary.ca/secretariat/system/files/standing\\_committee\\_diagram\\_2013.pdf](http://www.ucalgary.ca/secretariat/system/files/standing_committee_diagram_2013.pdf).

## **SECTION 9: ACRONYMS**

APC	Academic Planning Committee
ASC	Academic Standards Committee
ASC SOS	Academic Standards Committee Subcommittee on Standards
CLE	Committee on the Learning Environment
CLRC	Campus Law Review Committee
FDC	Facilities Development Committee
GFC	General Faculties Council
GFC Exec	GFC Executive Committee (and Nominating Committee)
GSA	Graduate Students’ Association
PSLA	Post-Secondary Learning Act (Alberta)
RC	Replenishment Committee
SU	Students’ Union
UASC	Undergraduate Awards and Scholarships Committee
UTAC	University Teaching Awards Committee