



**Athabasca  
University**

**General Faculties Council**

**Handbook**

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*Note: This is not an officially approved GFC document. It is a compilation document, referencing GFC decisions and generally reflecting practices, and is intended to serve as a resource for GFC and its Standing Committees members.*

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## **The Role of General Faculties Council**

The [Post-secondary Learning Act](#) (PSLA), proclaimed on March 17, 2004, stipulates that General Faculties Council (GFC) is responsible for the academic affairs of Athabasca University, subject to the authority of the Board of Governors (Board).

GFC should be an effective voice of the academic community, approving academic policy and priorities, and offering its advice to other decision-makers on issues touching upon the academic work of the University. GFC:

- provides a forum of shared governance which gives effective voice to the various interests and constituencies within the University, and which provides for the effective dissemination of information concerning institutional objectives and priorities.
- provides a clear and vigorous articulation of institutional goals and priorities, thereby creating a policy framework within which departmental and faculty planning can occur.
- responds in a facilitative manner to proposals originating elsewhere within the University.
- ensures that decisions respecting proposals originating from departments, faculties and GFC committees are taken within the context of institutional priorities and with clear understanding of the potentially adverse impact on, and tradeoffs for, other units.

GFC and its standing committees should be guided by the following governance principles:

- be accountable and take responsibility for their roles within the governance system.
- provide a participatory, inclusive, and collaborative environment.
- all actions undertaken with transparency.
- consultations occur before approval or endorsement is sought.
- members be accountable to the ideal that the University community participate in academic decision-making.

GFC must ensure that it maintains a broad perspective on issues within the framework of the University's mandate, [IMAGINE Plan](#), foundational plans, and established priorities. It is expected to provide vision and leadership to the academic community. GFC members are encouraged to review the [IMAGINE Plan](#) and foundational plans listed below, available on [the Office of the Provost and Vice President Academic website](#).

### **Athabasca University Foundational Plans**

[Imagine Learning Framework](#)

[EMPOWER: Athabasca University Human Resources Plan](#)

[RISE: Athabasca University's Digital Transformation, Our 5 Year IT Strategy](#)

[Strategic Research Plan 2018-2022](#)

[Student Services Strategic Plan 2018-2023](#)

[NUKSKAHTOWIN – MEETING PLACE Strategic Plan 2020](#)

[Strategic Enrolment Management Plan](#)

[Internationalization Framework](#)

[Student Mental Health Strategy](#)

[Faculty Strategic Plans](#)

## **The Responsibilities of General Faculties Council**

GFC, as specified in section 26(1) of the PSLA, subject to the authority of the board, is responsible for the academic affairs of the university and, without restricting the generality of the foregoing, has the authority to:

- (a) *exercise any power of a faculty council that GFC considers desirable to exercise;*
- (b) *consider and make decisions on the reports of the faculty councils as to the programs of study in the faculties;*
- (c) *determine all programs of study to which clause (b) does not apply that are to be offered by the university for credit toward the requirements for any degree, diploma or certificate;*
- (d) *determine the timetables for examinations and for lectures and other instruction in each faculty;*
- (e) *consider and make decisions on the reports of faculty councils as to the appointment of examiners and the conduct and results of examinations in the faculties;*
- (f) *provide for the granting and conferring of degrees other than honorary degrees;*
- (g) *provide for the preparation and publication of the university calendar;*
- (h) *hear and determine appeals from the decisions of faculty councils on applications, requests or petitions by students and others;*
- (i) *consider all matters reported to it by any faculty council and communicate its opinion or action on those matters to the faculty council concerned;*
- (j) *determine the date for the beginning and end of lectures in the university and also the beginning and end of each university term;*
- (k) *make rules and regulations for the management and operation of libraries;*
- (l) *recommend to the board the establishment of faculties, schools, departments, chairs and programs of study in the university in any subject that GFC thinks fit;*
- (m) *make rules and regulations respecting academic awards;*
- (n) *determine standards and policies respecting the admission of persons to the university as students;*
- (o) *make recommendations to the Board with respect to affiliation with other institutions, academic planning, campus planning, a building program, the budget, the regulation of residences and dining halls, procedures in respect of appointments, promotions, salaries, tenure and dismissals, and any other matters considered by GFC to be of interest to the university;*
- (p) *authorize lecturing and teaching on the university premises by persons other than members of the staff of the university;*
- (q) *authorize a school to have a school council of the same nature and with the same powers, duties, and functions as a faculty council and, in its discretion, revoke any authority so given.*

## **How General Faculties Council Works**

GFC attempts to expedite its work as much as possible, and the Office of the Chief Governance Officer and General Counsel takes a leading role in planning, routing, and scheduling, to ensure that proposals move through the process as quickly as thoughtful decision-making permits. A transcendent principle in the work of GFC has been the determination to provide fair consideration of an issue through thoughtful and timely debate, ensuring that opposing views and minority interests are considered.

GFC has delegated some decision-making authority to its Standing Committees. For example:

- Academic Planning, Policy, and Standards Committee approves proposals for changes to existing undergraduate and graduate programs (e.g., new degree designation, new curriculum, new certificates or diplomas, name change, degree FLE change, new thesis/course route) unless, the

changes are to be applied retrospectively, or in the opinion of the Provost and Vice President Academic, the committee should recommend to Council concerning the proposal.

- Student Academic Appeals Committee adjudicates appeals on penalties for academic misconduct.
- Student Awards Committee approves the criteria and description for new undergraduate and graduate student awards.

GFC receives reports and information items from its committees and from other areas of the university that touch on the work of the academic community.

GFC has a responsibility to ensure that others understand the nature of its decision-making. These are some of the means by which GFC attempts to communicate with a wider audience:

- Elected members are expected to report back to their faculty councils on the work of GFC, and appointed members are expected to report back to their constituents.
- GFC agendas and approved minutes are public documents and are available on the Office of the Chief Governance Officer and General Counsel website. Agendas are distributed at least one week prior to each meeting, and minutes are posted after their approval at the next meeting.

### **The Connection between General Faculties Council and the Board of Governors**

The PSLA establishes the roles of the Board and GFC, but there are overlapping jurisdictions. For example, a new program proposal has its academic elements reviewed by GFC, who makes recommendation for approval to the Board, and its financial components and its relationship to institutional priorities examined and approved by the Board.

The President is both the Chair of GFC and a voting member of the Board. The PSLA requires any recommendations from GFC to the Board be transmitted to the Board through the President (section 26(2) PSLA). As such, the President is the conduit between GFC to the Board and presents proposals from GFC to the Board.

One representative of GFC sits as a voting member of the Board. That representative is elected by the members of GFC for a three-year term, affirmed by the Minister, and can be reappointed (section 4(1) AU Regulation).

The Administration serves as the operational link between the two governing bodies. The Office of the Chief Governance Officer and General Counsel ensures that items flow from one committee system and governance body to the next, designing a schedule and routing for expeditious travel. The Vice-Presidents and other officers ensure that the policies approved by the Board, GFC, and/or Senior Leadership Team are implemented, and that the University's business and academic programs operate within the policy framework approved by the Board.

As prescribed within the [Policy Framework – Governing Policy](#), *“The Board of Governors of Athabasca University (the Board) has ultimate authority over all University policy. The Board retains the authority to establish and revise Board policies. The Board delegates its authority to establish and revise Academic policies to the General Faculties Council and its authority to establish and revise Administrative policies to the President through the President’s Executive Team.”*

## **General Faculties Council Membership**

The membership composition for GFC is set out under section 10 of the [Athabasca University Regulation](#). Section 10 states:

*10(1) The general faculties council consists of the following members:*

- (a) the president of Athabasca University, who is the chair;*
- (b) the vice-presidents of Athabasca University;*
- (c) the dean of each faculty;*
- (d) the director of each school;*
- (e) the chief librarian;*
- (f) the director of extension or, if there is none, the officer performing comparable functions;*
- (g) the registrar;*
- (h) the members elected in accordance with section 24 of the Act;*
- (i) 2 students nominated by the council of the students association;*
- (j) one graduate student nominated by the council of the graduate students association;*
- (k) one tutor nominated by the organization representing tutors;*
- (l) 2 members, each nominated by the non-academic staff;*
- (m) the members appointed in accordance with section 25 of the Act.*

The number of full-time academic faculty members to be elected by faculties is set out in section 24 of the PSLA. Section 24(2)(a) requires the total number of elected members be twice the number of persons who are members by virtue of their offices. The number of members that may be elected by each faculty is relative to the number of full time academic in a faculty compared to the number of full-time academic faculty in the university as a total (section 24(2)(b) PSLA).

Section 25 of the PSLA permits the members of GFC to appoint members.

## **General Faculties Council Meeting Schedule**

GFC normally meets six (6) times per year. Dates and times for regular GFC meetings are determined by the GFC Executive Committee. Once approved, the GFC meeting schedule, July 1 to June 30, is provided to members and posted on the [Office of the Chief Governance Officer and General Counsel](#) website.

## **General Faculties Council Rules**

The [General Faculties Council Rules](#) (“the Rules”) set out the rules of order for meetings of GFC and its Standing Committees as well as responsibilities of members, standards for conflict of interest and confidentiality. The Rules also set out:

- definitions and interpretation of the Rules
- terms of office for categories of members
- terms under which a person shall cease to be a member
- responsibilities of the Chief Governance Officer and General Counsel or designate
- the council year
- the powers and duties of GFC
- rules of order for meetings
- standards for confidentiality and conflict of interest
- maintenance of the official records of GFC
- the signing authority to use the academic seal
- the standing committees of GFC

## **Responsibilities and Expectations of Members**

In exercising their powers and discharging their duties under the PSLA, the members shall:

- act honestly and in good faith with a view to the best interest of the University; and
- exercise the care, diligence, and skill that a reasonably prudent person would exercise in comparable circumstances (GFC Rules, clause 5.1).

Expectations of members include:

- familiarizing themselves with the GFC Rules, and GFC's role in governing the University
- come to meetings prepared to engage in respectful, meaningful discussion, provide considered, constructive and thoughtful feedback and commentary, express opinions, and ask questions to enable GFC to exercise its best judgement in decision-making.
- declaring any conflict, they may have with respect to particular agenda items contained within the meeting agenda.
- ensuring all confidential GFC records and information presented during in-camera sessions of meetings remain confidential, even after the member ceases to be a member.
- attending scheduled meetings. Pursuant to clause 4.5.6 of the GFC Rules a member ceases to be a member after missing three consecutive meetings, except for ex-officio members and members of the Student Academic Appeals Committee.

To ensure GFC meetings are being effective and productive, business is conducted in expeditious manner, and to provide guidance to GFC members, the GFC Meeting Etiquette provides guidelines/protocols for meetings, based on the GFC Rules and Roberta's Rules of Order. The GFC Meeting Etiquette is available on the [Governance Portal](#).

Although meetings of GFC are public, members, participants or observers are not permitted to record the meeting or any portion thereof either through the Microsoft Teams application, any other application, smartphone, computer, AI, or any similar device.

## **The Staff of General Faculties Council**

The President is the Chair of GFC and presides over the meetings. The Chair is responsible for keeping the meeting moving in an orderly fashion, ruling on questions, etc.

The Provost and Vice-President, Academic is the Vice-Chair of GFC, and steps in for the Chair when needed.

The Office of the Chief Governance Officer and General Counsel is responsible for assisting the Chair as needed, especially for ensuring that rules, policies, and procedures are properly followed, producing minutes of the meetings, conducting research for historical GFC documents, past items to serve as examples for current proposals, and other archived GFC materials, as required.

## **Quorum**

A majority of the members (50% + 1), excluding vacant positions, shall constitute a quorum at any meeting, unless otherwise expressed in the GFC Rules. For example, amendments to any rule of GFC must be approved by a majority of two thirds of the members of GFC whether present or not.

It is the duty of the Chair, with the Office of the Chief Governance Officer and General Counsel, to determine if quorum is present before calling the meeting to order.

### **Replacement and Voting at Meetings**

Members may not send alternates to meetings of GFC or its standing committees (GFC Rules, clause 4.9 and 14.10.8).

Each member present, including the chair and ex officio members, is entitled to one vote and only the members present may vote on any question (GFC Rules, clause 9.7.1). This applies for GFC and its standing committees.

When a question is put to vote by the Chair, members will indicate their vote in such manner as the Chair may direct. The Chair will declare the result of the vote and such declaration will be conclusive. If, prior to the time when the Chair has undertaken to determine the vote, any three members request that a count of the votes be recorded, then the number of votes for and against the question will be counted and this count recorded in the minutes of the meeting. If any member wishes to record his or her abstention from voting on any question, the member must do so immediately following the declaration by the Chair. Abstentions will not be counted (GFC Rules, clause 9.7.2). This applies for GFC and its standing committees.

Voting by proxy is not permitted (GFC Rules, clause 9.7.4). This applies for GFC and its standing committees.

### **Motions/Resolutions**

Except where altered by the Rules, Robert's Rules of Order govern the proceedings of GFC and its Standing Committees (GFC Rules, clause 9.1). This includes making of motions/resolutions.

A motion/resolution brings business before GFC or a standing committee for decision. A motion/resolution is debatable, amendable and takes a majority vote to adopt.

Motions/resolutions use affirmative language whenever possible (e.g., to approve, endorse). A motion/resolution should be as detailed as possible. It is important for a motion to be worded precisely as members vote on the exact language, not on a vague idea.

A motion made at GFC must be moved and seconded before the subject matter of the motion is open for debate (discussion). Motions made at GFC standing committee meetings do not require a seconder.

Once the debate is concluded, the Chair asks the question (those in favor, those opposed) and declares the results (carried, not carried).

A commonly misused term is to "table" a motion/resolution. To table a motion is to set a motion/resolution aside temporarily in order to take up something of immediate urgency. The intent is not to: i) activate a motion/resolution; or ii) kill a motion/resolution or to put it off to the next, or a future, meeting. If a member wishes to make a motion/resolution, he/she should "move" it. If a member wishes to propose that decision on an already moved motion/resolution be deferred to a later date, he/she should move to "defer or postpone" the action.

Types of motions and rules relating to motions are outlined in Robert's Rules of Order.



## **A Typical General Faculties Council Agenda**

A typical GFC agenda is broken up into the following sections:

- Approval of the agenda, including the consent agenda  
Consent agendas are used to expedite business at a meeting. The purpose of the consent agenda is generally to eliminate the need to deal separately with many routine items not requiring explanation or discussion. If a member wishes to discuss any item contained on a consent agenda, he/she may request that the item be removed from the consent agenda and placed on the regular agenda for consideration or discussion.
- Conflict of Interest Declaration  
Subject to the [Code of Conduct for Members of the University Community](#) (the “Code”) and the Conflict of Interest provision (clauses 11.1 and 11.2) of the [GFC Rules](#), members will be asked by the Chair to declare any conflict they may have with respect to particular agenda items contained within the meeting agenda.
- Reports
- Action and Discussion Items
- Business arising from the consent agenda
- Adjourn

Members may request that an item be added to a GFC meeting agenda by submitting a completed [Briefing Note](#) and any pertinent background materials two (2) weeks prior to the next scheduled GFC Executive Committee meeting, to the Office of the Chief Governance Officer and General Counsel ([ocgogovernance@athabascau.ca](mailto:ocgogovernance@athabascau.ca)) who, through the Chair will bring the request to the GFC Executive Committee for consideration. The request should clearly set out how the item falls within the purview of GFC.

The GFC Executive Committee will determine whether the request is within the purview of the GFC and may:

- add the item to a GFC meeting agenda,
- request more information from the proposer(s), or
- determine that the item should not be brought to the GFC.

Following the GFC Executive Committee meeting, the Office of the Chief Governance Officer and General Counsel will communicate the decision of the GFC Executive Committee to the person(s) who submitted the request.

## **Committee of the Whole**

A large assembly like GFC may occasionally need to form a Committee of the Whole. The purpose of a Committee of the Whole is to suspend a formal meeting in order to address a matter that can better be dealt with informally. Any votes taken during a Committee of the Whole session are not considered decisions of GFC, but recommendations to GFC (Roberts Rules of Order). The rules are as follows:

- The members of GFC vote to go into Committee of the Whole.
- Committee of the Whole functions as a real committee; when it convenes, GFC ceases to be in session.
- Committee of the Whole can be chaired by a new Chair. The Chair of Committee of the Whole is appointed by the Chair of GFC.
- Committee of the Whole votes to rise at the conclusion of its session.
- Rising implies that Committee of the Whole ceases to exist and GFC is back in session.

Proceedings of Committee of the Whole are not entered into the formal minutes of the assembly. The Office of the Chief Governance Officer and General Counsel prepares a brief synopsis of the Committee of the Whole proceedings and enters them as an appendix to the minutes.

### **Faculty Councils**

The PSLA sets out the required membership of faculty councils in section 28 and the powers of faculty councils in section 29. GFC approves terms of reference for each faculty council.

### **The Committee System of General Faculties Council**

PART V of the GFC Rules sets out the 'rules' governing standing and ad hoc committees (e.g., a task force, a working group, or an advisory group), and defines the standing committees. Unless otherwise specified, standing and ad hoc committees are subject to the same procedural rules as GFC.

GFC has six standing committees:

- [Executive](#)
- [Academic Planning, Policy, and Standards](#)
- [Student Academic Appeals](#)
- [Student Awards](#)
- [Academic Excellence Awards](#)
- [Academic Research](#)

The membership and terms of reference for each standing committee set out the membership composition, and powers and duties for that standing committee.

### **Electoral Process for General Faculties Council and its Standing Committees**

The GFC Executive Committee has responsibility to encourage nominations for vacancies on GFC, its standing committees, and other bodies requiring representation from GFC or the academic community.

Every Spring, pursuant to section 24 of the PSLA, calculations are conducted to determine the total number of full-time academic faculty members to be on GFC, and a list of nominations being sought for various elections to be held and appointments to be made is prepared by the Office of the Chief Governance Officer and General Counsel. Occasionally throughout the year, a list of nominations being sought if vacancies have been identified is prepared.

Calls for nominations are issued, and confidential elections are conducted by the Office of the Chief Governance Officer and General Counsel. For example:

- for full-time academic faculty members to serve on GFC pursuant to section 10(1)(h) of the AU Regulation, notices are given to full-time academic faculty members from the respective faculty.
- for student representatives to serve on GFC pursuant to sections 10(1)(i and j)) of the AU Regulation, notice is given to the representative students associations.
- for the tutor/academic expert representative appointed by the organization representing tutors/academic experts pursuant to section 10(1)(k) of the AU Regulation, notice is given to the organization representing tutors/academic experts.
- for non-academic staff members to serve on GFC pursuant to section 10(1)(l) of the AU Regulation, notice is given to the professional and excluded professional staff.

Generally, nominations are open for up to two weeks.

If elections are required, electronic voting will be facilitated using Simply Voting, a confidential online voting system. If elections are not required, the nominated person(s) will be elected by acclamation.

**The General Faculties Council Website**

The [GFC website](#), contains the GFC Rules, standing committee membership and terms of reference, current membership lists, the meeting schedules, GFC agendas and approved minutes, and links to governing documents and legislation.

**The General Faculties Council Governance Portal Site**

The [Governance Portal](#) site is utilized to make meeting agenda packages electronically available to members of GFC & the GFC standing committees approximately one week prior to each meeting. Members are notified by email once the meeting agenda package has been uploaded.

**General Faculties Council Contact Directory**

The Office of the Chief Governance Officer and General Counsel provides support for all areas of General Faculties Council. If you have any questions or require further information, please contact [ocgogovernance@athabascau.ca](mailto:ocgogovernance@athabascau.ca).