Canadian University Senates Project: A Summary for Western University

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Senate Survey Summary

In August 2011, an invitation to participate in a survey on academic senates (i.e., the senior academic decision-making body of each institution) was sent to the senate secretaries of 84 member universities of the Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada. Senate secretaries from 41 institutions (including 4 universities that have unicameral governance structures) completed the survey. The response rate was 49%. The aggregated data presented here are from 37 bicameral institutions and 1 unicameral institution that has a senior academic committee equivalent to a traditional senate.

Among the 41 institutions that participated in the senate secretary survey, a total of 20 institutions participated in the subsequent senate member survey. By June 2012, when the second survey was closed, 373 completed responses had been received from voting senate members; the response rate was 23%. The survey invitation was sent to 102 members of your senate, of whom 39 voting members responded to the survey; the response rate for your institution was 38%.

Data from the two surveys, and particularly responses to the open-ended questions, revealed a number of themes in common with a similar survey undertaken in 2000, of which this survey is an update. One interesting difference is that the issues identified in the earlier survey often pointed to external factors (funding, tuition, government policy), whereas internal governance issues were more frequently referred to by respondents to our survey. In general, both the senate secretaries and the senate members we surveyed in 2011-12 identified similar issues and problems in response to our open-ended questions, and overall five themes were most frequently cited:

1) *Effectiveness of Senate's oversight of program quality, teaching and learning*

The paired question in the senate member survey about what academic senates 'should do' and what their senate 'actually does' showed a significant gap related to the oversight of academic matters and reviewing the performance of the university in academic areas. Responses to the open-ended question reinforced a perception that, given their statutory role as the senior academic oversight body of the institution, senates need to focus more attention on matters related to quality control, quality assurance and academic excellence. There was a sense in many of the responses of the importance of senates' focusing on the 'big picture'—matters such as accessibility, academic integrity, and the broader relevance of programming to the institution and to society—and not simply being distracted by the details of things like course approvals.

2) *The senate's relevance (or lack thereof), effectiveness, and power, especially in financial matters*

When asked whether the senate is an effective decision-making body, approximately half of the respondents agreed that it is. Many of the responses to the open-ended comments addressed a sense that senates lack relevance or power, though there was less unanimity about the source of this apparent irrelevance. Some respondents blamed rushed decision-making because of agendas that were too packed; others suggested that the real decisions (particularly financial decisions) are made elsewhere (by the administration or the board, but also by the senate's own committees). Still others talked about domination of the Senate by an 'old guard' who are not allowing younger faculty to bring their perspectives, or by members who bring their own agendas to every meeting, or by those who treat the Senate as a constituent assembly rather than an oversight body, or by academic administrators who vote as a bloc. Many of the responses pointed to a real hunger on the part of respondents for lively, meaningful debate on meaningful issues.

3) Role confusion and power imbalance/struggle between senate and board/administration

A large number of comments had to do with the role of the senate vis-à-vis that of the board of governors and of the administration. There were several sub-themes that emerged here, including frustration that the senate's authority over academic matters is weakened by its lack of power or influence over financial matters; annoyance at senate members who continually try to raise matters in the senate that are not in the academic sphere; a sense that there are few opportunities for the board and senate to connect in any meaningful way; and a perception that boards of governors bring a corporate agenda to the academy without understanding collegial values. The notion that senates simply rubber stamp decisions that are made elsewhere came up frequently, and several respondents expressed the view that the administration does not provide sufficient, or sufficiently transparent, information for the senate to make well-informed decisions.

4) Need to get faculty members engaged and involved in collegial self-governance

Another recurrent theme for both secretaries and senate members is the challenge of engaging potential senate members—including students and junior faculty—in collegial self-governance, and for the senate itself to become more engaged in carrying out its governance role and responsibilities. Factors such as apathy, poor communication about the importance of collegial self-governance, and workload pressures were the most often-cited reasons.

5) Need for constitutional change or reform

One thing that was striking about the survey results was that compared with the survey undertaken 10 years ago, there seems to be a much higher sensitivity among senate members to the importance of good governance and governance reform. This is reflected partly in the results of the survey of secretaries, which show that over the past 10 years many senates have

undertaken reforms such as re-structuring of committees, and devoting more attention to senate member orientation. Many senate member respondents expressed a desire for constitutional change in order to work more effectively. Often these comments related to the size of the governing body, a matter that is usually enshrined in legislation and so is beyond the authority of most senates to address on their own. Other themes around constitutional reform had to do with diversifying or rebalancing the membership, and frequency of meetings. A subtheme raised by some respondents relates to the formal relationship, or lack of one, between the academic senate and individual faculty councils, and the need to clarify reporting and authority relationships between these two levels of academic governance.

In general, our study resulted in a few conclusions that we will be sharing in conference presentations and submissions for publication, and that will include the following observations:

- Important structural and organizational changes have taken place in Canadian universities, and more attention is being focussed on governance arrangements and awareness.
- Size and effectiveness of senate governance is still an issue, and there may be opportunities for continuing reform in this respect.
- Shared governance continues to present issues relating to roles vis-à-vis board, senate, and administration. There are opportunities for better education about the statutory authority of each of these bodies, and for creating better linkages among them.
- Senates should seek ways to intentionally engage more faculty in the academic oversight of our institutions.
- There are important roles senates are not playing but need to play, especially relating to oversight of academic quality and assessing their own performance.

The following tables provide some important data which may be of interest to you. Both aggregated data and data from respondents of your university are included. Tables 1 to 7 are from the secretary survey and Tables 8 to 14 are from the senate member survey. Please refer to the full report for more analysis of the survey results.

Data from the Secretary Survey

Table 1 Percentage of major member categories on the senate (voting members only)

Membership category	Aggregated data		Western University
	Percentage of all senate members (%) *	Percentage of senates reporting members in this category (%)	Percentage of senate members (%) *
Faculty	48	100	**45**
Students	16	97	**18**
Deans (ex officio)	13	97	**11**
Other senior administrators	5	76	**3**
Department heads (ex officio)	5	24	-
Vice presidents or provost	4	95	**4**
Members of affiliated or federated institutions	2	42	**9**
Alumni	2	42	**5**
President	1	97	**1**
Non-academic staff	1	39	**2**
Members of the board of governors (ex officio)	1	42	**2**
Chancellor	0.7	55	**1**
Bargaining unit representatives	0.4	16	-
Government representatives	0.2	13	-
Other	2	39	-

* The percentage does not add up to 100 percent due to rounding errors.

Table 2 Selection of the Chair of the senate

Means of selection	Aggregated data (% of senates)	Western University
Ex officio - president of the university	84%	√
Ex officio - chancellor	0%	
Ex officio - provost or VP academic	0%	
Elected by members of senate	11%	
Elected by a committee	3%	
Appointed by the president	0%	
Appointed by a committee	3%	
Other	0%	

Table 3 Foundation of and changes to the membership and role of senate

	Aggregated Data (% of senates)			Western University
	Yes	No	In part	
Membership specified by University Act or provincial legislation?	55%	16%	29%	**Yes**
Role described in University Act or provincial legislation?	76%	8%	16%	**Yes**
Any changes in University Act or provincial legislation?	26%	74%	n/a	**No**
Other university constitutional documents or bylaws that further clarify the role of senate?	89%	11%	n/a	**Yes**
Any changes in university constitutional documents or bylaws?	47%	53%	n/a	**No**

Table 4 Committees of the Senate

	Aggregated data			Western University
# of standing committees	Average	largest	Smallest	**9**
	12	26	1	
Changes to committee structures in the past 10 years (% of senates)	Yes	76%		**Yes**
	No	24%		

Table 5 Relationship between the Senate and the faculty councils

	Aggregated data (% of senates)		Western University
Is the membership and role of faculty councils specified by University Act or provincial legislation? (% of senates)	Membership is specified.	3%	**Neither**
	Role is specified.	14%	
	Both membership and role is specified.	17%	
	Neither the role nor the membership is specified.	67%	
Are there university constitutional documents or bylaws that further clarify the membership and roles of the faculty councils?	Yes	78%	**Yes**
	No	22%	
Are faculty councils constituted under the authority of the senate?	Yes	50%	**Yes**
	No	31%	
	Other	17%	
Do faculty councils report to the Senate?	Yes	36%	**No**
	No	64%	

Table 6 Operational practices of the Senate

Operational practices	Aggregated data (% senates)		Western University
Orientation materials or sessions for new senate members	Yes	79%	**Yes**
	No	18%	
Is there a senate executive committee?	Yes	82%	**Yes**
	No	18%	
Frequency of senate executive meetings	Weekly	0%	**Monthly**
	Every two weeks	0%	
	Every 3-4 weeks	3%	
	Monthly	74%	
	Every two months	3%	
	Once a term	0%	
	Once a year	0%	
	Other	19%	
Are meetings of the senate open to public?	Yes	53%	**Yes**
	No	8%	
	In part	34%	
Frequency of senate meetings per year	Average	9	**10**
Is the senate term renewable?	Yes	100%	**Yes**
	No	0%	
Maximum number of consecutive terms for senate members	1	0%	**2**
	2	24%	
	3	5%	
	More than 3	0%	
	Unlimited	71%	

Table 7 Percentage of senates reporting the role of senate in four policy areas

Policy areas	Aggregated data (% of senates)		Western University
	Yes	No	
Role in annual budget or financial allocation process	66%	34%	**Yes**
Role in strategic planning process	76%	24%	**Yes**
Role in decisions relating to university advancement	24%	74%	**Yes**
Role in decisions related to research	89%	8%	**Yes**

Data from the Senate Member Survey

Table 8 Senate member respondents by membership category （%）

Membership category	Aggregated data	Western University
Faculty member	48%	**41%**
Academic administrator (dean, chair, department head)	20%	**26%**
Undergraduate student	11%	**-**
Senior university administrator	6%	**8%**
Other	4.3%	**8%**
Graduate student	3.8%	**5%**
External to the university	3.5%	**8%**
University support staff	3.2%	**5%**
Other university appointment	0.5%	**3%**

Table 9 Average hours per month spent on senate-related work

	Aggregated data	Western University
Average hours per month spent on senate-related work	6.5	**4.2**

Table 10 Responses to the work that respondents do as a member of the senate

Statement	Data category	Responses (% of respondents)		
		(Strongly) Disagree	Neutral	(Strongly) Agree
I am an active member of the senate.	Aggregated	6%	16%	78%
	Western	**10%**	**23%**	**67%**
I prepare in advance for senate meetings.	Aggregated	3%	6%	92%
	Western	**0%**	**8%**	**92%**
I am able to influence senate decisions.	Aggregated	25%	31%	45%
	Western	**36%**	**28%**	**36%**
I am provided with the information I need to make decisions as a senate member.	Aggregated	12%	13%	75%
	Western	**10%**	**8%**	**82%**
I receive too much information from the university.	Aggregated	65%	25%	9%
	Western	**69%**	**31%**	**0%**
I know the organizational structure of the university.	Aggregated	4%	8%	88%
	Western	**0%**	**5%**	**90%**
The orientation I received as a new senate member adequately prepared me for my work on the senate.	Aggregated	23%	25%	51%
	Western	**36%**	**10%**	**54%**

Table 11 Comparison between respondents agreeing ("agree" and "strongly agree") with statements on the role a senate should play and the role it does play.

Statement	Data category	Responses (% of respondents)	
		Agree "Should"	Agree "Does"
Periodically review its own performance	Aggregated	94%	26%
	Western	**87%**	**10%**
Regularly review the performance of the university in academic areas	Aggregated	93%	48%
	Western	92%	64%
Defend and protect the autonomy of the university	Aggregated	93%	49%
	Western	90%	56%
Play a role in determining the future direction of the university	Aggregated	91%	49%
	Western	79%	56%
Ask tough questions of senior administrators	Aggregated	94%	52%
	Western	95%	46%
Play a role in setting the university's budget	Aggregated	60%	19%
	Western	59%	33%
Play an active role in monitoring and trying to influence government policy	Aggregated	56%	17%
	Western	46%	28%
Play a role in establishing research policies and strategic research directions	Aggregated	72%	37%
	Western	62%	36%
Play a role in defining priorities for fundraising and development	Aggregated	37%	10%
	Western	41%	15%
Be the final authority for approving major academic policies	Aggregated	92%	66%
	Western	97%	82%
Confine itself mainly to academic matters	Aggregated	70%	74%
	Western	74%	74%

Table 12 Perceptions about the work of the senate and the role of senate members

Statement	Data category	Responses (% of respondents)		
		(Strongly) Disagree	Neutral	(Strongly) Agree
I believe processes are in place to assure our senate that the academic quality of our university is maintained.	Aggregated	17%	18%	62%
	Western	**10%**	**15%**	**74%**
I believe that my role on the senate is to make decisions that are in the best interest of **the broader society**.	Aggregated	14%	22%	63%
	Western	**21%**	**28%**	**51%**
I believe that my role on the senate is to make decisions that are in the best interest of **the university as a whole**.	Aggregated	2%	2%	96%
	Western	**3%**	**3%**	**95%**
With most issues it is clear what course of action is in the best interest of the university as a whole.	Aggregated	25%	21%	53%
	Western	**15%**	**18%**	**64%**
I believe that it is difficult for our senate to make decisions involving significant change.	Aggregated	22%	14%	62%
	Western	**18%**	**13%**	**67%**

Table 13 Senate's relationship with the board, administration and faculty unions

Statement	Data category	Responses (% of respondents)		
		(Strongly) Disagree	Neutral	(Strongly) Agree
The division of responsibilities between our governing board and our senate is generally quite clear.	Aggregated	18%	17%	62%
	Western	**13%**	**15%**	**69%**
Members of our senate are made aware of decisions and actions being taken by our university's governing board.	Aggregated	28%	18%	52%
	Western	**31%**	**21%**	**46%**
I believe our senate should have more autonomy from our university's governing board.	Aggregated	23%	34%	42%
	Western	**21%**	**44%**	**33%**
The authority of our senate is increasing in comparison to our university's administration and governing board.	Aggregated	59%	33%	7%
	Western	**67%**	**33%**	**0%**
The role of our senate has been strengthened by the work of the faculty association/union.	Aggregated	38%	30%	28%
	Western	**31%**	**46%**	**23%**
The influence of the faculty association on academic matters is increasing in comparison to that of our senate.	Aggregated	36%	35%	26%
	Western	**31%**	**31%**	**36%**

Table 14 Effectiveness of the senate

Statement	Data category	Responses (% of respondents)		
		(Strongly) Disagree	Neutral	(Strongly) Agree
Our senate is an effective decision-making body.	Aggregated	23%	23%	50%
	Western	**26%**	**28%**	**46%**
Our senate primarily approves decisions made elsewhere.	Aggregated	17%	14%	67%
	Western	**%**	**8%**	**92%**
Most of the work of our senate is done in committees.	Aggregated	5%	10%	83%
	Western	**0%**	**5%**	**95%**
Our senate is too involved in decisions about the day-to-day operations of the university.	Aggregated	64%	24%	9%
	Western	**59%**	**26%**	**15%**
Our senate plays an important role as a forum for discussing important issues.	Aggregated	19%	19%	59%
	Western	**33%**	**26%**	**41%**
Our senate plays an important role in terms of facilitating the exchange of information between component parts of the university.	Aggregated	27%	19%	51%
	Western	**23%**	**31%**	**41%**
The size of our senate acts as a barrier to effective decision making.	Aggregated	43%	25%	29%
	Western	**41%**	**33%**	**26%**
I believe the number of members in the ideal senate would be….	Aggregated	54 (average)		
	Western	**54 (average)**		