

How to be a Faculty Senator

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This document is intended to familiarize both current and prospective members of the George Mason University Faculty Senate with the purposes and operations of that body. It is intended to be a living document, to be updated as needed by the Faculty Senate president with advice from Executive Committee, the Organization and Operations Committee, and the Faculty Senate as a whole.

Origins and Mission

History of faculty senates

Faculty senates in the United States date back to the development of research universities in the late nineteenth century. As Christian Anderson notes, the original plans for Johns Hopkins University—recognized as America’s oldest research university—included plans for faculty representation, though the Academic Council was only convened some years after the founding of the university.¹ Many universities established senates between 1940 and 1975, the period of rapid expansion of research and higher education.² George Mason University established its Faculty Senate in April 1974, less than two years after the university became independent of the University of Virginia.

Nationwide, faculty senates vary widely in name, age, composition, and authority. Not all universities have them, and established faculty senates have been abolished by state legislatures.³ Some faculty senates mostly respond to administration

¹ Christian K. Anderson, “The Creation of Faculty Senates in American Research Universities” (Ph.D., The Pennsylvania State University, 2007), 134, <https://www.proquest.com/docview/304819529/abstract/E9658DB8D29C4DE8PQ/1>.

² Christian K. Anderson, “The Creation of Faculty Senates in American Research Universities” (Ph.D., The Pennsylvania State University, 2007), 10, <https://www.proquest.com/docview/304819529/abstract/E9658DB8D29C4DE8PQ/1>.

³ Emma Whitford, “Texas University Boards Abolish Faculty Senates, Create Toothless Councils,” *Inside Higher Ed*, August 22, 2025, <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/faculty-issues/shared-governance/2025/08/22/tex-boards-abolish-faculty-senates-create>.

initiatives, while others set agendas, and still others perform only ceremonial functions.⁴ The George Mason University Faculty Senate's effectiveness depends on its elected members.

Key documents

The Faculty Handbook can be found on the university's Policies and Guidelines Page.⁵ The Faculty Senate Charter, Bylaws, and Standing Rules are online at the Faculty Senate page.⁶ *Robert's Rules of Order Newly Revised* is available for purchase, though you likely do not need your own copy unless you are particularly interested in the nuances of procedure.

The **Faculty Handbook** defines the functions of the Faculty Senate. As of 2026, it states that "Under powers delegated to it by the General Faculty, the Faculty Senate is the principal faculty advisory body to the President. It has particular responsibility for the formulation of university-wide academic policies and is the principal voice of the faculty in matters affecting the faculty generally. It advises the President and other members of the central administration concerning matters that affect the welfare of the University as a whole. The principal function of the Faculty Senate is to represent the faculty on all academic and governance issues not internal to any single college/school, including, but not limited to, curricular matters, matters concerning terms and conditions of faculty employment, and matters of academic organization and institutional change. In these matters, the Provost and Senate will consult during the process of planning and implementing changes."

The **Charter of the Faculty Senate** further defines the composition and function of the Faculty Senate, including the apportionment of voting seats.

The **Bylaws of the Faculty Senate** define officers, committees, and some basic rules.

The **Standing Rules** define meeting procedures specific to the Faculty Senate

Robert's Rules of Order Newly Revised defines meeting procedures not specified by the Faculty Senate bylaws and standing rules.

⁴ James T. Minor, "Understanding Faculty Senates: Moving from Mystery to Models," *Review of Higher Education* 27, no. 3 (2004): 343–63, <https://doi.org/10.1353/rhe.2004.0004>.

⁵ <https://provost.gmu.edu/faculty/policies-and-guidelines>

⁶ <https://facultysenate.gmu.edu/>

In case a conflict among these documents, the Handbook supersedes the Charter, which supersedes the Bylaws, which supersede the Standing Rules, which supersede Robert's Rules. All of those documents supersede this orientation document.

Officers and staff

The Bylaws define the roles of president, secretary, parliamentarian, and sergeants at arms. In addition, the Faculty Senate clerk, a university employee, manages the website and sends out agendas and other materials.

The Role of the Senator

Senators represent the general faculty, the specific unit that elected them, and, to some degree, their own interests and goals. They bring to the Faculty Senate expertise in a range of areas, some related to their teaching and research, others to their particular talents for administration, inquiry, persuasion, and communication.

Senators represent their schools or colleges, so they should report developments and solicit opinions from their colleagues. Mason's schools and colleges are widely varied in size, organization, and methods of electing senators, so each senator or delegation will need to determine how best to achieve this.

New senators should consider both their goals for the university and the specific contributions they can make. Once you set your goals, other senators can help you achieve them.

Committees

The monthly meetings of the Faculty Senate represent just a small portion of the work of the senate. Much more takes place at the committee level. By serving on these committees, senators assure a faculty voice in key university operations.

Types of committees

Senators serve on many types of committees. Some have very specific functions, some have annual duties, some respond only to specific appeals or grievances, and some work on a single task before dissolving. Consider how you might best use your expertise, interests, and talents and learn more about the work of each committee that sounds plausible, reading their charges and perhaps by contacting the chair.

Senate Standing Committees

Senate Standing Committees are composed only of voting members of the Faculty Senate. As of 2025, the Faculty Senate relied on five standing committees: Academic Policies, Budget and Resources, Faculty Matters, Nominations, and Organization and Operations. Their charges and membership are listed on the Faculty Senate website. With five committees of five senators each (with minimal overlap), roughly half of faculty senators serve on these committees.

University Standing Committees

University standing committees are composed mostly of instructional faculty who are not members of the Faculty Senate, but most have at least one Faculty Senate member. Their charges, set by the Faculty Senate, may specify that one or more voting member of the Faculty Senate be a member, sometimes from specific Faculty Senate standing committees.

Other Standing Committees and Councils

These are bodies whose charges are not set by the Faculty Senate, but whose membership includes one or more voting senators.

Ad hoc committees and task forces

From time to time, the Faculty Senate may be asked to name members to serve on temporary ad hoc bodies on such issues as grading or campus planning.

Faculty Senate Executive Committee

As stated in the Bylaws, Executive Committee of the Senate is composed of the Senate President, the Senate Secretary, the chairs of Faculty Senate Standing committees, and the chair of the Faculty Handbook Committee

Service on committees

The Faculty Senate Nominations Committee circulates lists of committees needing Faculty Senate representatives, and asking for volunteers. Let Nominations know what committees most appeal to you. You can also nominate yourself from the floor of the Senate, but going through Nominations saves time.

While it is nice to find a spot on a committee that you care about, at times you may have an issue that is best addressed by a committee on which you do not sit. For example, if you or a colleague has a concern that would be best addressed by the Budget and Resources Committee of the Faculty Matters Committee, but you don't

serve on that committee yourself, you might contact the chair of that committee and ask that the committee consider the issue, or give you time to speak.

Full Senate Meetings: Format

Timing and format

The full Faculty Senate typically meets once per month during the academic year, from August through April. If needed, the Faculty Senate schedules overflow meetings. Meetings are held on Wednesdays, 3:00 to 4:15. Please avoid scheduling classes during that time. Since Senate meetings sometimes do run long, ideally you would not teach on Wednesdays at 4:30, but many senators do teach in that slot and simply depart the meeting when it's time to go to class.

Since March 2020, when the campus shut down at the start of the Covid pandemic, the Faculty Senate has met primarily by Zoom, but there is some possibility we will choose to resume in-person meetings on the Fairfax campus. While only senators and those non-senators recognized by the presiding officer can speak during a full senate meeting, typically dozens or even hundreds of other people—including senior administrators and sometimes members of the press—watch the proceedings.

The full Faculty Senate rarely meets during the summer, but it may convene if matters are pressing, as it did in summer 2025. Some committees, including the Executive Committee, do some work in the summer.

Traditionally, the President invites the Faculty Senate to a Mathy House reception some time in September. While attendance is not a duty, it is a nice opportunity to speak informally with the president and fellow senators.

Preparation: Reading agenda and Minutes

With input from committees, and sometimes individual senators, the Executive Committee prepares an agenda for each meeting. These include attachments, such as proposed resolutions or other documents. In addition, draft minutes from the previous meetings are typically ready and posted. Reserve some time to read these prior to the full senate meetings.

Signing In

To conduct business, the Faculty Senate requires a quorum, defined in the bylaws (as revised in December 2025) as “A simple majority of the total membership of the convening body, excluding non-voting members and vacant positions.” At the start

of each Zoom session, the secretary will post a link in the Zoom chat asking everyone to sign in. Please do so and identify yourself as a voting senator in order to ensure we reach quorum.

Full Senate Meetings: Business

Electing members to committees

Many committees require some number of members—whether senators or other instructional faculty—to be elected by the Faculty Senate. The elections, including calls for nominations from the floor, are held during full meetings of the Faculty Senate. Prepare for these by reading the slates of nominees, and by preparing to nominate yourself or someone else if appropriate.

Hearing from senior leaders and administrators

The rector, president, and provost regularly attend full meetings of the Faculty Senate, offer remarks, and take questions. This is a good opportunity for senators to raise issues of particular concern to them, in a forum where these senior leaders are accountable for what they say. Other university administrators may announce major developments, helping to spread the word to faculty.

Committee reports

Committees, especially Senate standing committees, will often report the progress or completion on various tasks and take questions, without seeking a Faculty Senate vote on a motion.

Motions from committees

Committees of all sorts may seek Faculty Senate approval of a range of actions, from amendments to the Faculty Handbook to changes in the Mason Core. These motions are debated and voted upon according to the Standing Rules and Robert's Rules.

Resolutions

Faculty senators write and debate resolutions on matters of concern to the faculty, often in response to policies enacted or proposed by the state government, the Board of Visitors, or the university administration. While only advisory, such resolutions can help shape the conditions under which faculty research, teach, and

work. These motions are debated and voted upon according to the Standing Rules and Robert's Rules.

Getting Help

The Faculty Senate Executive Committee consists of experienced senators who are committed to making the senate run well. The senate president should be able to answer any question or refer you someone who can. The Nominations chair or chairs can help you find appropriate committees, while the Organization and Operations chair or chairs and the parliamentarian can explain the workings of the senate. Finally, experienced senators from your college or school may be able to help you understand your particular role.