



**UNIVERSITY OF WATERLOO
GRADUATE STUDENT ASSOCIATION**

Research Report for Council

Higher Education Governance

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Purpose

The purpose of this report is to provide an alternative to Robert's Rules of Order for The Graduate Student Association of the University of Waterloo's (GSA-UW) Board of Directors and Council to determine a governance model that better supports engagement and meeting efficiency. This report includes key considerations and recommendations to help support a transition from Robert's Rules of Order to a possible alternate structure.

Issue

The main issue surrounding the current governance model surrounds the efficiency at which ideas can be brought forth by council members while also ensuring that all voices are heard in an equitable manner. This hierarchical nature of governance can deter participation from council members and therefore an alternative structure that aids in representation and accessibility overall is preferred. An alternative structure that allows for a more fluid dynamic will help foster the GSA-UW's values of "transparency, inclusivity, integrity, and self-improvement."¹

Background

Currently GSA-UW uses Robert's Rules of Order to hold meetings in an efficient manner. The GSA-UW council consists of a body that relates to the academic and political representation of graduate students at the University of Waterloo. Council consists of a Chair of Council (appointed by council), a representative from each department across all the faculties at the University of Waterloo, Non-voting At-large Councillors appointed by Council, GSA Officers, and GSA Directors.

Meetings are best representative when council members can represent and speak on behalf of their respective department at Council meetings. Councillors play an important role in voting on social and political actions brought forth to Council. Councillors must conduct themselves according to the GSA's mission and values throughout their appointment. The GSA defines their mission as:

"The GSA's mission is to serve the graduate students of the University of Waterloo (UW) with dedication and commitment to enhance the quality of their academic and social experience and promote their well-being. We envision a University where the interests of graduate students are protected, and their voices are heard; where graduate students are able to realize themselves optimally free from social, financial, academic, environmental, and physiological barriers. The GSA values transparency, inclusivity, integrity, and self-improvement."

(Councillor's Quick Guide to the GSA, 2020)

In turn, the Board of Directors is the governing body of the corporation of GSA-UW and oversees the operations of the corporation. Therefore, if a divide exists between the Council and the Board of Directors, there is friction in the overall democratic process. This report aims to explore the available options of governance and meeting models to ensure effective communication is taking place across members of the GSA-UW.

Therefore, this report will explore popular criticisms of Robert's Rules, as well as possible solutions and their adaptability to discuss the best possible course of action the GSA-UW should take in their future governance models.

¹ Graduate Student Association - University of Waterloo. (2021, April 14). *Corporate Documents & Bylaws*. gsauw.ca. <https://gsauw.ca/governance/corporate-documents-bylaws/#elementor-tab-title-1657>

Key Considerations

What are notable alternatives to Robert's Rules of Order, and what are the strengths/weaknesses of each system from the perspective of student engagement and productivity?

There are several alternatives to Robert's Rules of Order. However, most only consist of minor variants of Robert's Rules. One of these rules, such as "Martha's Rules", although effective in bringing slight changes to processes, does not help with overall reform with the issues that can arise through Robert's Rules.

However, there are two unique and notable alternatives to Robert's Rules, these consist of:

1. Consensus Processes
2. Dynamic Facilitation²

A Consensus Process (CP) is best for making decisions where all members can wholeheartedly agree on an outcome, and thus the outcome can effectively last. One of the keys to ensuring a CP goes smoothly is through ensuring "thoughtfulness and care" in making sure everyone feels heard. As the group holds an important facilitation role together, a CP can help members feel a collective accomplishment.

In contrast, a Dynamic Facilitation (DF) process is great in combining the creative energy of a diverse group in order to deal with bigger and more difficult issues. A DF creates an open environment where the atmosphere is "conducive to the transformation of people and problems".

In sum, consensus decision making is where participants work towards creating proposals that have an aim for acceptance by all. They primarily follow attitudes of collaboration, cooperation, egalitarianism, inclusion, and most importantly participation. A dynamic facilitation process ensures that everyone feels heard and safe to talk. However, in contrast to a consensus process, a dynamic facilitator does not direct the group, but instead lets the group work towards an outcome amongst themselves undergoing a creative process where ideas can flow freely. This is because it is suggested that in a "non-directive manner" people can come up with new and creative solutions in better ways and arrive at better interpersonal understanding through an open dialogue.³ Both alternatives differ from Robert's Rules in that they allow for better participation and are more inviting of participation regarding all members.

Although Robert's Rules provides a shared language and shared points of reference that are predictable in moving through an agenda, a level of literacy in Robert's Rules is required to participate. This can result in unnecessary bureaucratic red tape that hinders essential participation from all members of the GSA.

According to the Renison University College 2020 Anti-Racism *ConversAction* Summit Report:

"Complex and inaccessible governance and decision-making makes trying to change systems and processes within the institution confusing and challenging at the best of times, and impossible at the worst" and that these governance models create a "need to speak the language of bureaucracy for insights to be deemed as valuable or worthy" which "limits BIPOC participation in institutions due to the ways in which certain groups have been kept out of accessing universities or colleges, and therefore have not built generational knowledges and the language to engage with these institutions. Why does someone need to have a working knowledge of committee structure, Robert's Rules, and collegial governance to share how they've been harmed

² The Co-Intelligence Institute. (n.d.). *Comparison of Robert's Rules of Order, Consensus Process and Dynamic Facilitation*. co-intelligence.org. <https://www.co-intelligence.org/l-comparisonRR-CC-DF.html>

³ <https://www.co-intelligence.org/DFManual.html#others>

by certain institutions and have valid suggestions/ideas of how to provide redress and be proactive around fighting racism?"⁴

There is a recognition that the status quo is ineffective in creating a welcoming and participatory environment for all members and thus other forms of agenda setting and meeting structures should be considered. As per GSA-UW's policies, it would be ineffective to continue with a model that many students on campus have voiced is inaccessible and difficult to maneuver in an efficient way.

Appropriate alternate forms to Robert's Rules of Order would be the previously mentioned Consensus Processes (CP) and Dynamic Facilitation (DF) models.

The strengths of the CP model are as follows:

- CP models are constantly oriented to what is best for the whole group. Deliberations are insightful, inclusive and everyone is fully engaged in the implementation of final decisions. Therefore, outcomes have more stability. At best, CP models seek agreement but aim to create a deeper shared understanding that aligns everyone in a shared approach to an outcome.
- Proposals in a CP model flow naturally as dialogue persists about the problem being discussed.
- Interpersonal understanding is pursued in a CP meeting as a goal. This ensures that participants feel fully seen and comfortable in the group.
- When disagreements arise, they are valued as information resources for building a solution that everyone can agree with. Participants will work with a disagreement to ensure a consensus is reached. Participants either make room for diversity in the agreement or let go of their attachment to their perspective.
- In a CP, compromise is one tool to build agreement, but is not the desired outcome. The desired outcome of a CP is to satisfy everyone's needs and interests in the best way possible.
- CP require a strong level of community and commitment; participants need to understand the goals of a CP and the end results for everyone.
- A CP can work with only a moderately trained or moderately experienced facilitator, as it contains a nature of cooperation and group support.
- There are fewer rules in a CP than in Robert's Rules, and a shared awareness of these rules tends to make manipulation difficult. A CP model empowers all equally.

The strengths of the DF model are as follows:

- A shared field of perception is created to include the diversity of all perspectives, ideas, and concerns in the group. Participants' creativity blossoms and in many cases a DF model involves re-definitions of the original problem statement. Success is not defined solely by the solutions, but also by the ongoing creative conversations that are generated by participating.
- Proposals are encouraged and recorded on a chart pad as possible solutions, but they do not determine the flow of conversation, nor do they become the focus of the decision-making process. Thus, consensus solutions grow as they emerge to contain the shared energy of the group through discussion.
- Greater interpersonal understanding and connection is generated by giving participants the opportunity to hear each other in greater depth than is usually allotted as the norm.

⁴ Kofi Campbell and Ethan Candler. (2020). ConversAction: Race Matters, 2020 Anti-Racism Summit Report. Renison University College.
https://uwaterloo.ca/renison/sites/ca.renison/files/uploads/files/conversation_report_aoda.pdf (pg.24)

- Disagreements are re-framed as valuable additions to the group exploration. Each disagreement is acknowledged or recorded in the group's charts.
- The purpose of DF is co-creativity; therefore, compromise is naturally regarded as uninspiring.
- The facilitator follows group energy, helping individuals to be creative and unique and ensures that individual voices are always appreciated and never met with judgment. It is important to understand that instead of consciously pursuing a "decision-making process", dynamic facilitation invites the emergence of collective breakthroughs.
- A DF model requires no initial training but does require a skilled facilitator to ensure good results.⁵

Both alternate models require a facilitator in lieu of a traditional Chairperson. In Robert's Rules, the traditional Chairperson maintains order, keeps discussion progressing towards a decision and decides procedural matters by Robert's Rules. However, although Robert's Rules provides order and consistency, its positives do not outweigh its drawbacks.

Notable weaknesses of Robert's Rules of Order are as follows:

- Robert's Rules are too complicated and can be difficult to understand let alone put into practice.
- Robert's Rules are too rigid, where many people become "expert" at simplified and modified unique versions of the rules through participation with various other organizations, but there can be disagreement on what the rules are.
- Robert's Rules discourage participation, as they require a lot of work to understand and be comfortable with the rules which can be off putting to people without previous experience and people who do not have sufficient time in their daily lives to learn these rules.
- Robert's Rules can become easily weaponized, when the complexity of the rules can become a tool for people whose primary purpose is to derail or disrupt a meeting or to prevent a meeting from acting. If groups stick too closely to Robert's Rules and dismiss active and constructive conversation, then the rules do not serve their purpose.⁶

Thus, in contrast to Robert's Rules, a good meeting is where members feel involved and feel as though their attendance and participation can make a difference in a substantive way. Members should have equal access to and an equal chance for participation.

What governance structures do other Canadian GSAs use to operate their Board/Council?

Most other Canadian GSAs use Robert's Rules or a revised/simplified version of Robert's Rules to operate their Board/Council. The models used by governing student bodies often mimic the models used by the universities themselves to govern the institution as a whole. Although a knowledge of these governing systems is useful in reaching institutional level members of the university to effectively participate and be a voice for students across campus, the GSA can adopt a better model at the student governance level to ensure students do not encounter the same roadblocks to their questions and concerns.

Notably, most Canadian GSAs use this bicameral system of governance. However, across the board, many of these systems have been "criticized for being overly secretive, exclusive and out of touch with

⁵ The Co-Intelligence Institute. (n.d.). *Comparison of Robert's Rules of Order, Consensus Process and Dynamic Facilitation*. co-intelligence.org. <https://www.co-intelligence.org/l-comparisonRR-CCDF.html>

⁶ Mike Parker. (2019, November 5). *Members, Not Robert, Should Rule*. socialistcall.com. <https://socialistcall.com/2019/11/05/roberts-rules-dsa-meetings-democracy/>

the university community they are supposed to serve”.⁷ Thus, more transparency and accessibility to participation in and knowledge of the GSA structures is vital in ensuring that these structures are not labelled “opaque and exclusive” when people do not know much about how they operate.

Most Canadian universities also have similar mandates, mission statements, and values surrounding the topics of advocacy, inclusivity, and support. Yet these statements can seem empty when the structures in which they operate do not foster accessible participation. Therefore, a change to how members and non-members can participate is an important start to bringing more inclusivity to the spaces within the GSA.

An interesting approach to other Canadian university GSAs is the University of Toronto Graduate Students’ Union (UTGSU). Adjacent to their Council and Board, the UTGSU also consists of multiple committees, caucuses, and levy groups. These Ad-Hoc groups provide more accessible and usable support to students in need as they are catered to help with a number of student issues. Some of their committees include: the Environmental Justice and Sustainability Committee, the Equity and Advocacy Committee, and the Finance Committee.

Notable caucuses include: the Race and Ethnicity Caucus to be committed to social justice, community building, and healing, the International Students’ Caucus to be the main student body that coordinates approximately 5000 international graduate students’ interests and concerns, and the Queer Caucus for UofT students who identify as LGBTQ2S+ and holds various events.⁸

Why these specific alternatives to Robert’s Rules?

Although Robert’s Rules conduct timely and ordered meetings, often feedback notes that the rules are rigid and inaccessible to all members of a meeting. Thus, Robert’s Rules have been shown to be poorer in conflict resolution. As such, this report concludes that alternatives which require a facilitatory role to ensure equitable discussion are more favourable.

For example, consensus and facilitation methods have previously been used in the Obama Administration, where “female staffers adopted a meeting strategy they called “amplification”, when a woman made a key point, other women would repeat it, giving credit to its author. This forced the men in the room to recognize the contribution — and denied them the chance to claim the idea as their own”.⁹ Overall, this resulted in greater recognition of not only women but also other junior aides and allowed for a more inclusive meeting space. Therefore, members of organizations have effectively altered rigid meeting procedures in favour of allowing for voices to be heard that otherwise would have been drowned out or given less opportunity to speak up in the traditional meeting order. It has been noted that the GSA-UW has been using break-out rooms during meetings to facilitate discussion within smaller groups that can then be shared with the larger group. It is recommended that the GSA-UW continue this practice as it is a valuable method in ensuring voices are heard.

In contrast to Robert’s Rules where an ideal participant is knowledgeable about procedural language, in a CP or DF model, the ideal participant is simply cooperative and speaks their truth. The participant should not edit or censor their contributions out of fear, but at the same time should share their responsibility of creating a safe and productive meeting. Therefore, the disadvantages of Robert’s Rules are clear to those who have seen the success that can be achieved by using other models.

⁷ Moira MacDonald. (2018, January 3). *University Boards in the Spotlight*. universityaffairs.ca. <https://www.universityaffairs.ca/features/feature-article/university-boards-spotlight/>

⁸ University of Toronto Graduate Students’ Union. (n.d.). *Caucuses*. utgsu.ca. <https://utgsu.ca/committees-caucuses-levy/caucuses/>

⁹ Juliet Eilperin. (October 25, 2016) “How a White House Woman’s Office Strategy Went Viral”. The Washington Post. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/powerpost/wp/2016/09/13/white-house-women-are-now-in-the-room-where-it-happens/>

Conclusions and Recommendations

Is there an alternative to Robert's Rules of Order that would better serve the GSA-UW? An alternate approach that ensures disagreements are not only effectively handled in a timely manner, but also with understanding and collaboration is suggested as the best way to serve the GSA-UW moving forward. The table below indicates the differences between the alternate models and Robert's Rules and their effectiveness in handling issues and disagreements that may arise:

HOW ARE DISAGREEMENTS HANDLED?	CONSENSUS PROCESS	DYNAMIC FACILITATION	ROBERT'S RULES
In an orderly and timely manner	✓	✓	✓
With fully engaged deliberations from the group	✓	✓	
With interpersonal understanding of one another	✓	✓	
With a shared field of perception to include the diversity of all perspectives		✓	
Discussion led by a facilitator in a collaborative process	✓	✓	

Overall Recommendation

A "Consensus Building Approach"

Therefore, an alternative to Robert's Rules that could be more readily implemented into the current structure of the GSA-UW is a consensus process approach called "The Consensus Building Approach (CBA)". The CBA was created by Harvard Law School professor Larry Susskind. Susskind is the director of the Public Disputes program at Harvard University and first established the "Consensus Building Institute" in 1993 as a not-for-profit whose staff of mediators are involved in "dispute resolution all over the world".¹⁰

Susskind states that it is not difficult to transfer to a CBA approach, as a group can gradually transition into the model while still using Robert's Rules. Susskind also explains that when using CBA, decisions are much more likely to have concrete action and get done due to everyone being consulted and having a hand in the plan.¹¹ If a CBA approach does not come to a consensus during the specified meeting time, and if members do not want to extend deadlines, the group does have the option to revert to the usual way of making decisions.

¹⁰ Laurie Smith-Frailey. (2007). Spectrum. MIT. <https://spectrum.mit.edu/summer-2007/breaking-roberts-rules/>

¹¹ Larry Susskind & Cruikshank, J. L. (2006). *Breaking Robert's rules: the new way to run your meeting, build consensus, and get results*. Oxford University Press. <https://books-scholarsportalinfo.proxy.lib.uwaterloo.ca/uri/ebooks/ebooks0/oxford/2009-11-30/3/0195308417> (pg. 191-194)

Overall, Susskind recommend that “the results of a CBA process are, in fact, easier to implement than decisions made by majority rule or other elaborate Robert’s Rules-type procedures. When clear reasons are given about why a decision has been made, those who prefer a different course of action will find it easier to live with the result. Because CBA seeks to include everyone in the decisions that are being made, it leaves relationships intact. This makes it easier to work together over the long term”.¹² Therefore, adopting a consensus approach that allows for all the benefits of an alternative to Robert’s Rules in an easy to understand and flexible way is recommended.

An Outline to Procedures as per a Consensus Based Model

Therefore, this alternative to Robert’s Rules that focuses less specifically on following procedure is a more functional, cohesive, and inclusive way of governance that I would suggest the GSA-UW implement based on the availability of appropriate facilitators willing to have moderate training or discussion surrounding the facilitation model. A Consensus Based model requires a facilitator who has broad and loosely defined powers to traffic discussion. They monitor participants’ behaviour to help each achieve their distinct cooperative roles. The facilitator ensures that each contribution is accessible to the whole and well-acknowledged. The qualities of presence, trust and openness are held by the facilitator to play a key role in the process.

I suggest a pilot test of a consensus model, as shown below:

Ground Rules Governing the Behaviours of Participants:

1. Only one person will speak at a time, and no one will interrupt when another person is speaking.
2. Each person agrees to candidly identify the interests of the constituency they represent.
3. Each person will express their own views, rather than speaking for others at the table or attributing motives to them.
4. Each person will avoid grandstanding (i.e., making extended comments or asking repeated questions), so that everyone has a fair chance to speak and to contribute.
5. No one will make personal attacks. Participants agree to challenge ideas, not people. If a personal attack is made, the facilitator will ask the participants to refrain from personal attacks. If personal attacks continue, the facilitator may ask the group to take a break to “cool off.”
6. Each person will make every effort to stay on track with the agenda and to move the deliberations forward.
7. Each person will seek to focus on the merits of what is being said, making a good faith effort to understand the concerns of others. Clarifying questions are encouraged; rhetorical questions and disparaging comments are discouraged.
8. Each person will seek to follow a “no surprises” rule - voicing her concerns whenever they arise. In this way, no one will be taken off-guard late in the deliberations when someone suddenly raises an objection.
9. Each person will seek to identify options or proposals that represent common ground, without glossing over or minimizing legitimate dis-agreements. Each participant agrees to do his best to take account of the interests of the group as a whole.
10. Each person reserves the right to disagree with any proposal and accepts responsibility for offering alternatives that accommodate their interests as well as the interests of others.

How is consensus reached?

1. Consensus is reached when the participants agree that they can “live with” the idea being proposed. Some participants may not agree completely with every feature of the idea as proposed, but they do not disagree enough to warrant opposition to the whole idea.

¹² Larry Susskind & Cruikshank, J. L.

2. The following scale will be used periodically by the facilitator to test whether consensus has been reached. Participants should express their level of comfort and commitment by indicating:
 - a. Wholeheartedly agree
 - b. Good idea
 - c. Supported
 - d. Reservations - would like to talk
 - e. Serious concerns - must talk
 - f. Cannot be part of the decision - must block it

If all the participants fall between a and c, consensus on the item under discussion will be assumed. When someone falls between d and f, that person must state concerns clearly and offer a constructive alternative.

3. The participants will consider their “fallback” option if no agreement can be reached, including mechanisms that provide incentives for the participants to continue trying to reach agreement. Fallback options include:
 - a. identifying issues requiring further research and suspending deliberations until that research has been completed;
 - b. agreeing to switch to a super-majority voting rule (e.g., something like a 75-percent or 80-percent majority would be required);
 - c. seeking a recommendation from the facilitator or an independent ex-pert regarding possible ways of resolving their remaining disagreements. This might provide a “reality check” that encourages one or more parties to come back to the table with more realistic expectations;
 - d. including a minority report;
 - e. letting the authorized decision maker (the facilitator) impose a decision.

Example Set-up for a Meeting Topic:

For example, as shown through the meeting topic of “Mandatory Mental Wellness Training for TAs”, in a CBA where the group has approximately thirty minutes to discuss the issue. A group through the guidance of a facilitator would follow the below steps:

1. Convene

The organizer/facilitator would prepare an assessment that will bring the right participants to the table to explain the issue (such as those with more knowledge/empathy of the issue).

2. Assign roles and responsibilities

The facilitator would agree to facilitate the brainstorming and discussion, another group member would take notes on brainstorming ideas and discussion questions.

3. Facilitate group problem solving

The facilitator would guide brainstorming and discussions, such as raising concerns about the mandatory mental wellness training modules and how to best provide resources to students and training to TAs in the most helpful way.

4. Reach agreement

The facilitator ensures a consensus is reached where every member of the group can be content with the decision to move towards next steps.

5. Hold parties and groups to their commitments/ideas

In a consensus model all discussion, comments, questions, and concerns would be discussed in a sufficient manner through an open and facilitated discussion that would allow all members to speak in a comfortable, yet organized manner. This would ensure that there are concrete next steps for the topic brought up.

Creating Caucuses and Committees

Lastly, as caucuses and committees can provide more accessible and usable support to students because they are run by smaller groups of individuals, it is also recommended that the GSA-UW consider creating and enhancing these groups to implement further accessibility between students and the GSA-UW.

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