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A brief introduction to collegial governance

Universities and colleges are complex, varied institutions. In common, however, is that a community of scholarly practice should be the heart of each.

Of course, post-secondary institutions are a part of and must engage with the wider communities in which each is embedded. Good scholarship and education are not insular endeavours. Public institutions exist to benefit their many publics and should be governed in partnership with those publics.

Nevertheless, this introduction to collegial governance proceeds from the premise that the scholarly community's work is the source of the institution's value to society. Moreover, the benefits are deepest and most enduring to the extent that scholars are free to explore avenues of inquiry, learning and critique that, while guided by disciplinary considerations and informed by wider engagements, are not dictated from the outside.¹

As central members of an institution's community of scholarly practice, academic staff have a key institutional role to play not only through their immediate academic labour — for example, through their teaching and research work — but also in a collegial capacity. At the same time as being a member of their institution's scholarly community, each member of the academic staff is an employee of their institution. The tension inherent in the dual nature of the academic staff role requires a working environment, including but not limited to formal terms and conditions of employment, that protects and fosters the collegial dimension of the role.

What is collegiality?

Collegiality is the full participation of academic staff in the institutional processes that shape the conditions of academic work. Alongside fair employment practices, equity and inclusion in the workplace, academic freedom, and others, collegiality is a fundamental condition of academic work necessary for the ongoing fulfilment of the academic mission.

To be clear, collegiality is not about the comportment of individuals and must not be confused with congeniality or civility.

Although the CAUT governance library concerns itself specifically with governance, it is important to note that collegiality is not limited only to formal governance processes such as those carried out at a university faculty council or senate. Beyond formal governance settings, collegiality is also vital to:

- faculty hiring and complement renewal
- peer review
- program and curriculum development
- workload and resource allocation
- collective efforts to develop and improve pedagogy and scholarly practice
- priority-setting and decision-making processes at all levels, where these affect the academic mission

Even where institutional processes and structures are nominally collegial, to be meaningful, collegiality must be actively fostered and supported so that academic staff are able to participate fully within these settings.

See the CAUT [Policy Statement on Collegiality](#) for more.

What is governance?

Governance refers to the highest level of decision making for an organization and to the oversight of its operations, ensuring that it is well managed.² This responsibility includes:

- articulating the organization's mission
- approving its plans (including but not limited to budgets), guiding their development, and monitoring their implementation
- setting its policies
- selecting, (re)appointing and evaluating the performance of its executive officers
- ensuring that its mission is being fulfilled in accordance with approved plans and policies

In short, governance is an exercise — and potentially a democratic one — in setting the direction of an organization and in overseeing its progress.

Although governance and management are related, they are distinct: management refers to the supervision and direction of an organization's operations — ideally in a way that is consistent with established plans and policies. By contrast with the potentially democratic nature of governance, management is a finer-grained, sometimes technical but always non-democratic exercise in supervising and directing operations, with the aim of meeting established goals.

Senior management may have substantial authority in this respect, including to propose new planning and policy directions, implement plans, allocate resources, supervise the work of the organization's employees, develop reports, and support governance activities. But senior management must remain accountable to governing bodies. Although managers will have opinions about the organization's affairs (as well as interests of their own) and should be free to express them, the organization's management should never unilaterally assume the authority to set the institution's mission and overall direction.

Combining the two: What is collegial governance and why is it important?

Governance at Canada's public universities and colleges typically (but not always) follows a bicameral model comprising a board of governors and a senate (or their equivalents).

The board of governors, comprising members selected from (and ideally representative³ of) both internal and external communities, is responsible for those affairs considered to be primarily non-academic in nature, such as financial, human resource, and campus development matters. Attending to these matters helps to ensure the overall viability of the institution.

The senate, whose members should be representative of the internal academic community and a majority of whom should be members of the academic staff, is responsible for those affairs considered to be primarily academic in nature. Attending to these matters helps to ensure an institution's academic health.

Whereas the senate is responsible for the academic affairs of the institution, the board of governors should serve as a link between the institution and its many publics, with the responsibility to mediate between the institution and its publics while protecting the institution's academic mission, institutional autonomy, and academic staff members' academic freedom. The intended balance is that academic institutions will retain sufficient autonomy, and academic staff will retain their academic freedom, so they may best serve society through the pursuit of knowledge and understanding while remaining attentive to the needs of the diverse communities in which they are embedded. For this reason, the term **shared governance** is often used to describe this ideal.

Collegial governance means that academic staff (alongside other members of the institution's scholarly community), through direct or representative membership on governing bodies such as senates and faculty councils, and consistent with the foundational principle of collegiality, play the decisive role in the governance of academic affairs. This includes:

- articulating the academic mission of their organization
- establishing its academic plans
- setting its academic policies and standards
- determining its programs of study and related organizational structures and curricular matters
- overseeing student affairs

Because these collegial governance bodies are responsible for the academic affairs of their institutions, they must also have the authority to oversee the management of academic operations. This must include the authority to initiate planning and policy development and to request reports from management. Further, their responsibility for the academic affairs of the institution requires that these collegial bodies play a significant role in the selection, (re)appointment and performance evaluation of academic administrators.

There is no neat division between the academic and non-academic affairs of a university or college. Rather, academic affairs are entangled with other institutional matters. Therefore, a senate or its equivalent must attend to recommendations from management, faculty councils and the board of governors. It must also have unlimited power of recommendation to the board on any matters within the board's purview that the senate considers to be of import to the institution. For example, the senate has a role to play during budget development, campus planning, etc., so that implications for the academic mission may be considered.

For this arrangement to work, the senate must be apprised of board and administrative proposals or initiatives before final decisions are made and must have meaningful opportunities to consider and provide recommendations.

See the CAUT [Policy Statement on Governance](#) for more.

The role of academic staff associations in supporting collegial governance

Academic staff associations have a role to play in strengthening systems of governance and in protecting and fostering the voices of the academic staff within them. This can be accomplished both through improving formal governance structures and processes (for example, through initiatives to improve legislation, bylaws, policies, etc.) and through developing members' capacity to engage fully in governance settings.

One avenue open to academic staff associations is to ensure that collective agreements confer rights and responsibilities for collegial participation as part of their members' terms and conditions of employment and that members are provided sufficient supports and resources, including information, so that they may meaningfully fulfil this responsibility. Collective agreements may also contain provisions to ensure that governance processes (such as institutional planning, policy development, and academic administrator searches) proceed under the auspices of the appropriate collegial governance bodies, are appropriately resourced, are open, and provide opportunities for robust academic staff participation.

Although collective agreements restrict management rights (in the interest of fair, equitable and democratic workplaces) by conferring contractual rights to unionized employees, pursuing collegiality provisions within a collective agreement does not imply that an academic staff association is seeking management rights for itself or to replace collegial governance with management-union co-management of the institution.

By analogy, the widely accepted – and necessary – inclusion of equity and academic freedom rights as part of members' terms and conditions of employment implies neither that the union can tell members how to exercise their freedoms nor that the union is seeking to supplant members' individual rights, needed to do their job, with a special role for itself. (Although, importantly, it ensures that rights are conferred equitably and provides members with recourse through the grievance/arbitration process in the event of alleged contraventions.)

Beyond negotiating collective agreements, academic staff associations can actively foster the capacity of its members to participate fully in collegial governance settings, both individually and in concert. Capacity development can include providing:

- educational and professional development activities related to governance
- resources, analyses and briefs to members
- opportunities to caucus and to coordinate efforts
- etc.

Academic staff associations can also play a crucial role by:

- monitoring governance matters at the institution
- tracking long-term trends
- bringing key issues to the attention of its members
- leading collective initiatives to safeguard collegial governance, whether proactively or in response to developments at the institution

Like management (see above), academic staff associations may adopt positions about certain institutional affairs — especially concerning the health of the institution’s scholarly community and the conditions of its academic work — and should be free to express them, including judiciously in governance forums like the senate.⁴ This does not mean that an association can impose its will on the institution through governance processes or compel its members to support association positions.

Adopting a position is not inherently a conflict between the interests of a single employee “stakeholder” group and the disconnected “best interests” of the institution as corporation. It reflects the basic reality that the health of the scholarly community at the heart of the institution is inseparable from the institution’s value to society at large — therefore to the health of the institution — and ought to be a mutual concern both of associations and of governing bodies.

Endnotes

- ¹ Collegial governance as described in this introduction is at odds with a stakeholder model of governance that centres the post-secondary institution as corporation, with faculty, students, administrators, government, the business community, and others positioned around it as corporation stakeholders. While the legal definition of the corporate entity is precise (albeit not necessarily simple), the nature of the institution's value to society may be ill-defined. The health of a community of scholarly practice, free from subordination to external interests, is not necessarily understood as a central concern of governance. The best interest of the institution is viewed instead through a conflict-of-interest lens. Members of certain internal stakeholder groups — especially faculty — are characterized as being in structural conflicts of interest. It is therefore the role of a properly trained board of governors, as fiduciaries, to take stakeholder concerns into account but to retain the authority to articulate the mission of the institution and to make decisions on its behalf. The success of such a board is seen to rely especially on its external members (often executives and prominent professionals from the private sector), who are considered neutral, free from structural conflict, and better able to ensure that the institution serves the public interest (however they or the government that appoints them might understand it). Autonomy may be described as an ideal, but it is an autonomy that should vest in the board of governors (who may in turn afford a largely free hand to the president and senior management). In practice, the stakeholder model may disguise while furthering a shareholder model in which institutions attempt to demonstrate the economic return on investment demanded by members of some "stakeholder" groups.
- ² This introduction deals primarily with the governance of a single institution. Depending on the provincial or territorial context, an institution may be situated within a larger post-secondary system whose governance must also be taken into account. System-level governance may shape the classification and mandates of individual post-secondary institutions, may guide system-level resource allocation according to a jurisdiction's post-secondary funding model, may afford or constrain program approval and review, may influence systems of credit transfer, etc.
- ³ Faculty members serving on boards of governors are strongly encouraged to review CAUT's legal advisory on the fiduciary duty of university board members.
- ⁴ For example, an association might take the position that the institution should not enter into an agreement with a third-party educational service provider. As another example, an association might take the position that an upcoming presidential search should have an open finalist phase. It may in that case argue that the relevant institutional policy should be amended accordingly. An association might also endeavour to secure related rights through collective bargaining, when the timing of bargaining rounds permits, but this should not preclude it from raising issues in other ways, including ways that generate deliberation within governance forums.

This document is part of CAUT's Governance Library, an evolving collection of resources for supporting member associations in efforts to strengthen systems of collegial governance at their institutions and to protect and foster academic staff voices within them.

Feedback and suggestions for continued library development are welcome. Please contact CAUT's Governance Committee at governance-gouvernance@caut.ca.



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