

Senate Governance and Nominating Committee

October 28, 2015

Referral from Senate – Oral Question Period

Background

Senate's Rules of Procedure currently state that "Notice of questions shall be given in writing in time to be circulated with the agenda for the meeting at which they will be asked". At the September 29, 2015 Senate meeting, some discussion occurred regarding Senate's Question Period and whether oral questions should be permitted in addition to those that are already submitted in writing. Some Senators also expressed the opinion that more than one oral follow-up question in response to the answers to written questions should be permitted from Senators, and that the entire 20 minutes allocated to Question Period should be used at each Senate meeting.

The issue was referred to the Senate Governance and Nominating Committee, where it was discussed at the Committee's October 13 and November 10, 2015 meetings.

Analysis and Discussion

The following issues regarding an oral question period were reviewed by Committee members:

- In the context of a modern university and its complex administration, an oral question period may often generate questions that require follow-up before they can be answered at a future meeting. This would likely result in one or more questions at each meeting being answered by the respondent stating that they will need to find out the answer and submit it in writing for the next Senate meeting, which simply duplicates the existing process of submitting written questions.
- The inability for the Senate Agenda and Summer Advisory Committee to review oral questions before they are asked, as is currently done with written questions, may lead to one or more questions from the Senate floor that do not fall within Senate's jurisdiction. The resulting discussion regarding whether the question should be permitted or not would be inappropriate use of Senate's time, given a Committee has already been charged with this responsibility.
- Senators already have many opportunities during a Senate meeting to ask questions. Follow-ups to written questions are permitted, and questions may be asked of the Principal and Provost after their reports, and of any Committee Chair who submits a report, either for Senate's information or a decision.
- Although Bourinot's Rules are used for both Senate meetings and Parliamentary proceedings, they are only used at Senate in the absence of an applicable rule within Senate's Rules of Procedure. In addition, the purpose of Senate is quite different from that of Parliament. Senate does not have a governing party and an opposition. Senate is self-governing, which makes portions of Bourinot's Rules inapplicable, hence the existence of Senate's own Rules of Procedure.

- The reading of oral questions simply to ensure they are heard and recorded is not a valuable use of Senators' time. Senate meetings require the attendance of a great many faculty, administrators, students, staff, and guests, and their time is an important public resource.

Recommendation

Members of the Senate Governance and Nominating Committee agreed that the opportunities already available for Senators to ask questions are sufficient, and that the institution of an oral question period would not enhance the functioning of Senate. Members requested that this report be available via a link from the University Secretariat webpage in a location that is easily accessible for those seeking more information on Senate's Question Period.

Respectfully submitted,

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