

An Unofficial Guide to
Responsibilities of Being a Senator

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The Senate is the duly elected representative group of faculty, students, and academic professionals on campus. It brings these groups together under the umbrella of shared governance and responsibility for maintaining open lines of communication between these constituencies and the campus administration. The work of the Senate helps shape key policies, processes, and decisions of importance to our campus, community, state, nation, and world.

The Senate and its committees are the central locus for the work of shared governance at the campus level. The Senate has special authority over legislative matters relating to academic policies affecting this campus or the University of Illinois System as a whole.¹ Still, most Senate actions require approval from other actors within the university and system prior to implementation. Even when Senate input is not required, many non-academic policy matters can benefit from consultation and coordination with the Senate. The Senate is, accordingly, most effective when it maintains healthy and productive relationships with other actors within the university and system and can play an active and trusted role when addressing key policy questions. That is what shared governance entails.

Without your responsible participation, the Senate cannot be effective at meeting its goals.² Here are ten key areas of responsibility that are critical for your effectiveness as a senator.

- 1. Attend Meetings Regularly.** As your unit's elected representative to the Senate, you are responsible for keeping in regular contact with your unit about Senate business and helping the Senate act on its agenda in each session. Many Senate actions require a quorum. Losing quorum can require the Senate to postpone time-sensitive matters and may require scheduling additional Senate meetings during the term. You are therefore expected to attend Senate meetings regularly and to plan to remain for the full length

¹ Unless otherwise stated in the University of Illinois *Statutes*, the Senate shall also determine for its university campus matters of educational policy including but not limited to: requirements for admission to the several colleges, schools and other teaching divisions; general requirements for degrees and certificates; relations among colleges, schools and other teaching divisions; the academic calendar; and educational policy on student affairs. The Senate—sometimes through its committees or joint appointments of its members—is regularly consulted by the administration for input and advice on matters of policy.

² Information about how the Senate works is always available for your reference at <https://www.senate.illinois.edu>. Agendas and minutes of Senate meetings are listed there, as are all the Senate committees and their membership. Under the link to "Governance," you can locate the Senate *Bylaws* and other governing documents, as well as the University of Illinois *Statutes* and *General Rules*.

of each meeting (which is regularly scheduled to last until 5:15 pm but may sometimes end earlier).

If you have a regularly scheduled conflict with Senate meetings or must regularly leave early, it is best to resign your seat and let your unit know so that it can promptly elect another representative who will be available to help conduct Senate business. If you must miss an occasional meeting or leave early on occasion, notify the Senate Clerk, Jenny Roether (senate@illinois.edu), prior to your absence so that the Senate can prepare to manage quorum.³

- 2. Be Prepared to Discuss and Vote.** Prior to each Senate meeting, you should review the materials on the agenda, especially those on the Action Agenda. These materials will be distributed in the week prior to the meeting. You should be ready to vote on any action items and participate in any discussions or motions relating to them. As a senator, you have the right to speak candidly for or against any item being considered, to make motions to amend from the floor, and to vote your conscience. Individual votes are taken publicly and become part of the Senate record.

You should also familiarize yourself with the [University of Illinois Statutes](#), the [General Rules Concerning University Organization and Procedure](#), the [Senate Constitution](#), [Senate Bylaws](#), and [Senate Standing Rules](#). The former two documents are system-wide documents that constitute the Senate, describe its statutory powers, responsibilities, and relations to other offices, and set forth the procedures by which the Senate operates. The latter documents concern internal rules of the Urbana Senate. Due to jurisdictional considerations, Senate actions and policies are only valid to the extent that they are consistent with these governing documents. Some of the most important and enduring actions the Senate can take involve proposed modifications to these governing documents. (Think of amendments to the U.S. Constitution.)

- 3. Try to Address Complex Issues in Advance.** If you have questions or concerns about an action item that might be addressed prior to a Senate meeting, you should consider contacting the sponsor (usually a committee chair or senator) before the Senate meeting. Although it is not uncommon for the Senate to vote for some amendments on proposals from the floor, it is usually inefficient to try to wordsmith complex documents before the full Senate without sufficient advance thought and preparation. Sometimes concerns can be addressed by suggesting revisions or amendments in advance and by obtaining a sponsor's agreement, which can greatly facilitate an amendment process proposed on the Senate floor.

³ Because your colleagues in your academic unit deserve to be represented in the Senate, if you miss two consecutive meetings without notifying the Senate Clerk in advance, it will be presumed that you have resigned from the Senate ([Senate Bylaws A.12](#)).

- 4. Learn How to Make Your Voice Effective.** As a senator, you may bring any issue of concern to the Senate Executive Committee or to a Senate committee that is charged with a particular issue. You may also propose action items to be placed directly on the Senate Agenda. When considering whether to pursue that latter option, it is wise to consult with the Senate Executive Committee, whose members may have advice that can help you produce proposals that will yield a productive Senate debate and vote. Most action items on the agenda are drafted and sponsored by a Senate committee, and it will often be worthwhile to address your concerns to the committee that has information and expertise on that particular issue. The members of the Senate Executive Committee may also know of related campus efforts or committee proceedings that are relevant to your concerns. They may be able to suggest particular stakeholders that would be worth consulting before bringing your item forward.

Given the number of stakeholders that are typically interested in Senate actions, unvetted proposals are usually not the most effective way of producing a desired outcome. The full Senate will typically take action items much more seriously if they have been vetted or even sponsored by a Senate committee or the Senate Executive Committee.

- 5. Volunteer for Committees to Ensure Your Voice Has Impact.** You should consider volunteering for Senate committees. Almost all of the Senate's most important work begins in committees, and committees are where the most extensive and detailed attention can be given to complex matters. Committees typically have special institutional information and experience related to their subject matters. Your contributions are likely to have a greater impact if you work on a committee that is charged with subject matters of interest to you than if you only raise or debate proposals from the Senate floor. When considering insufficiently vetted proposals from individual senators, the Senate Executive Committee or the Senate as a whole will, in fact, often refer the item to a relevant committee before bringing the item back to the full Senate floor.
- 6. Think Broadly, Even While Representing Your Unit.** The Senate is a representative democracy, not a direct democracy. As a member of a representative body, you should become informed about the issues, talk with colleagues both inside and outside of your unit, and in the end follow your conscience in judging what actions are best for your unit, the university, and the system. While you are elected to be an informed representative of your unit, you are not required to submit items for a local referendum.
- 7. Communicate Regularly with Your Unit.** Regardless of how you vote, you should keep your unit informed about actions the Senate is considering or taking that are especially relevant to your unit. Posting e-mail summaries of such actions and events after Senate meetings is one way to do that. Regular reports at your unit's faculty meetings or to your dean or department head can also help keep your unit informed. Keeping open lines of communication can help ensure that you are capable of representing any views or

concerns that are especially relevant to your unit consistent with your considered judgment. If you come from a unit with multiple senators, you might also consider meeting from time to time to discuss common issues and concerns and how best to raise them with the Senate.

- 8. Discuss and Debate Responsibly.** You should strive to express your opinions during Senate meetings and to your colleagues in reasoned, non-confrontational ways that respect the integrity of the Senate and your administrative colleagues and the value of their time and points of view. Remember that senators are all volunteers, serving to advance the good of the whole as they see it, just as you are. The Senate often serves as the public face of shared governance for the campus, and Senate meetings offer primary contact points between the Senate's constituencies and the central administration. As a voice for shared governance that operates within a larger institutional context, the Senate is most effective when it maintains productive relationships among its constituencies and with other actors at the campus and system-wide levels.

At the beginning of each Senate meeting, the Chancellor or the Chancellor's designee will typically provide remarks relevant to the state of the campus or current events. These remarks will be followed by a regular question and answer session. These are opportunities for you to learn about ongoing campus efforts, raise any questions or concerns, and help foster healthy and productive relationships with the administration.

- 9. Consider Your Audience.** You should bear in mind that decisions made by the Senate on this campus can affect not only our own faculty, academic professionals, students, and staff, but larger trends in higher education at the system-wide level, across state, throughout the nation, and even around the world. Senate meetings are open to the media and to the public. The tone and content of Senate deliberations is one measure of the health of a campus community.

- 10. Feel Free to Be a Strong Voice for Budget Transparency, Shared Governance, and Academic Freedom.** Though the Senate is only one part of a larger institutional system, it plays a distinctive role. Consistent with the Senate's unique role within the campus and system, you should always feel free to encourage budget transparency, principles of shared governance, and academic freedom at all levels of campus governance.