

DISCOVER GOVERNANCE VACANCY REPORT

*2015/16 Overview of Vacancy rates in Student
Governance Roles at the University of Alberta*



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1. INTRODUCTION

The effectiveness of undergraduate student representation on decision-making bodies at the University of Alberta is adversely affected by vacancies. These vacancies exist for a number of reasons such as mid-term resignations but are more recently attributed to issues related to students' participation in general. Students have identified some of the reasons for this lack of participation to be time involvement, not feeling electable, apathy, and a lack of relevant experience.¹ However, these reasons alone do not represent the entire issue and to gain a better understanding, data on vacancies must be collected.

Through the use of old attendance records, election information, and meeting minutes for both Students' Council and General Faculties Council, data was gathered for both bodies from the early 2000s onwards. The vacancy data was then put into several visuals that show the change in undergraduate representative vacancies over time.

It is Discover Governance's hope that this information will help us visualize trends in undergraduate student vacancies and evaluate and improve the representation of all students at the University of Alberta.

2. STUDENTS' COUNCIL

Introduction to Students' Council

Students' Council is the governing body of the University of Alberta Students' Union that oversees decisions regarding the direction of the organization. Students' Council has both a general assembly of students from every undergraduate faculty of the University of Alberta and standing committees with members of Students' Council on them. All of the aforementioned bodies are subject to representative vacancies, however the focus of this report is on the membership of Students' Council itself. This is because Students' Council has only 2 elections to its membership annually while committees elect on an as needed basis.

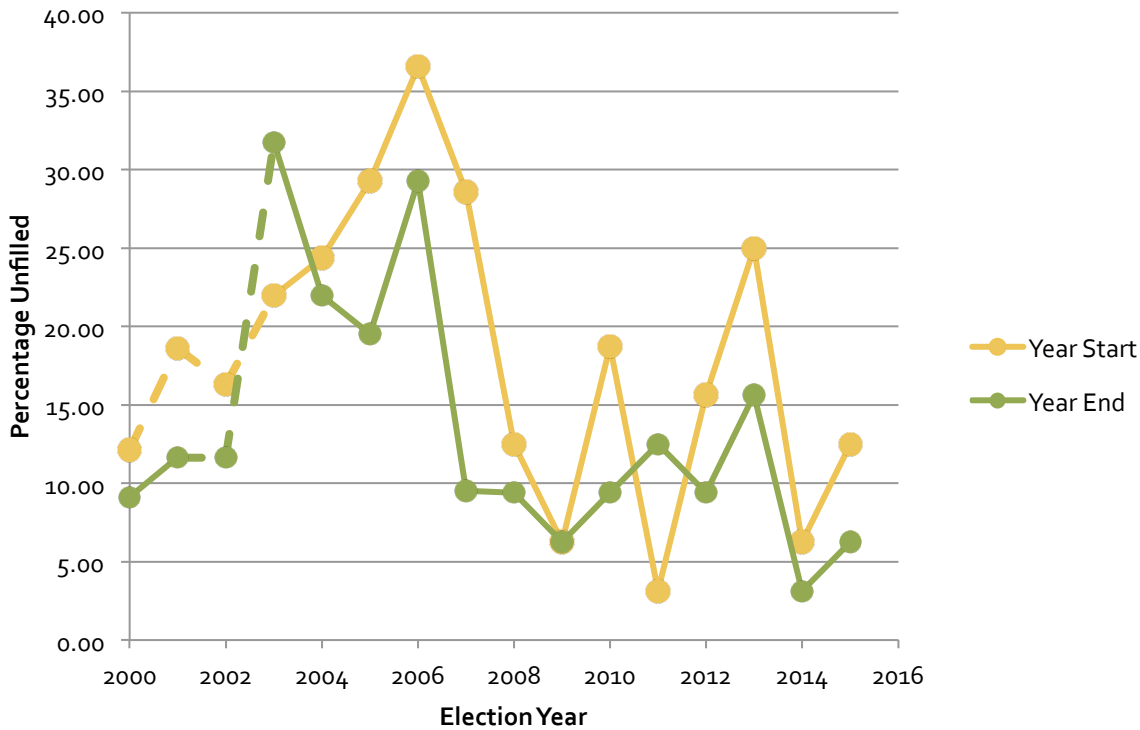
Composition

Over time the composition of Students' Council has changed both in quantity and type of representation. Students' Council has 32 seats for faculty councilors, 6 seats for executives and the board of governors representative, and the faculty distribution does not change often. The distribution of seats between faculties can sometimes change based on enrollment numbers, but in 2007 the number of overall seats available was decreased from 42 to 32. Other important events in the history of Students' Council membership are that the faculty of Rehabilitation Medicine had a single seat until 2006 when it ceased to be an undergraduate faculty, the Augustana Faculty seat did not exist until 2004 when it became part of the university, and the representatives on Council used to include residence association, president of athletics and various other constituent based positions but no longer does.

Vacancies

Since 2008, vacancies on Students' Council have never exceeded 25 percent of the general assembly. However, some faculties are represented significantly less frequently because of unfilled seats. Using data from elections, by-elections and resignations since the year 2000 a graph of the overall percentage of unfilled seats over time was created.

Percentage of Unfilled Students' Council Seats (2000-2015)



(Figure 2-1 Overall Percentage of Vacancies on Students' Council) ⁱⁱ

In Figure 2-1 there is a noticeable drop in vacancies in 2007-2008, which is from the reduction of Students' Council seats from 42 to 32. The reduction of seats on Students' Council has improved the reduction of vacancies over time, which is evident as vacancies are now stabilized at around 12% post by-election. The stabilizing of vacancies shows that by-elections are effective in most years, and are a useful operation of the Students' Union. Another conclusion that can be drawn from the data is that there is currently a limit to the effectiveness of filling Students' Council. A minimum number of vacancies on council of 5 percent or about 2 seats exists in the data and is a barrier in the goal of achieving one hundred percent filled Students' Council.

It is also important to note that the data before 2004 is inaccurate and extrapolated in some places due to records being inaccessible. In addition to this, the seat changes as noted in the introduction effect what the percentages represent from 2000-2006 relative to current years.

Breakdown

Students' Council has representation from all 15 of the University of Alberta's undergraduate faculties. From the data gathered it is clearly seen that some faculty seats are significantly harder to fill than others. To illustrate this, a graph was made comparing faculties in the percentage of the previous years that they have gone without vacancies.

Percent of Years of Students' Council Without Vacancies (2009-2015)

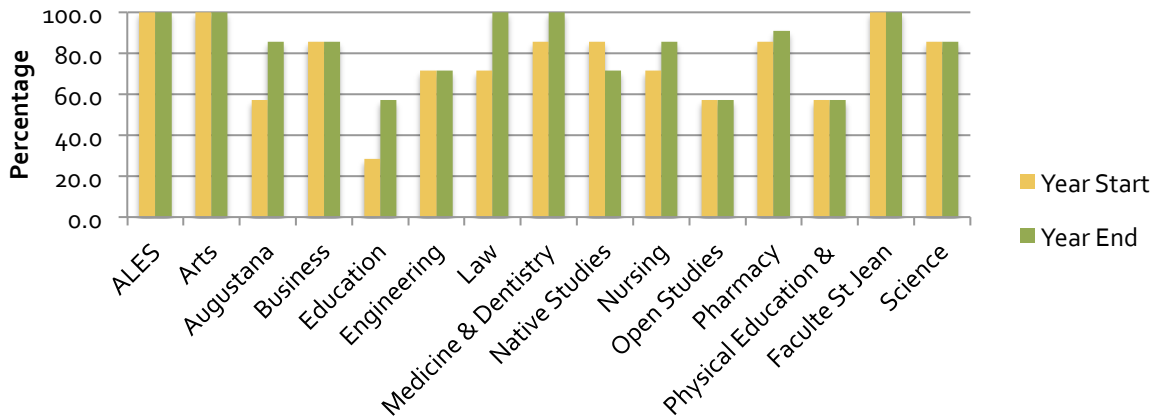


Figure 2-2 Percent of Council Years With No Vacancies Since 2009

In Figure 2-2 it is shown that some faculties were completely represented every year since 2009. Despite the effective filling of some faculties' seats, there are several faculties that are of concern for repeatedly not filling seats.

Percent of Years of Students' Council Without Vacancies (2011-2015)

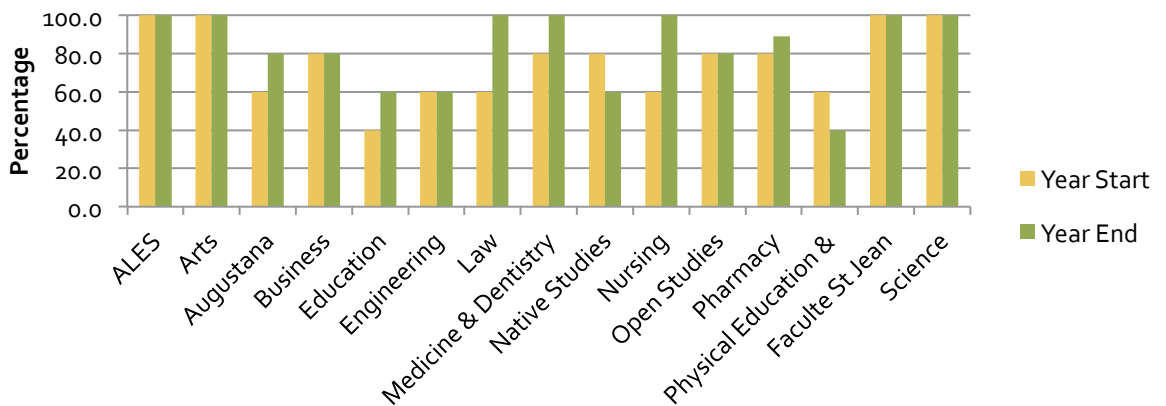


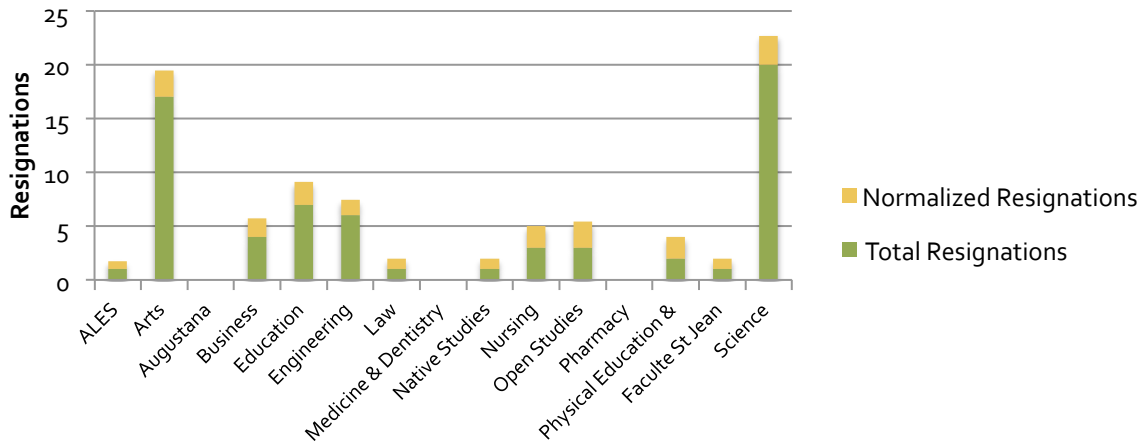
Figure 2-3 Percent of Years of Students' Council Without Vacancies (2011-2015)

By restricting the time period of our data to the previous five years only, we can get a better idea of what more recent vacancy trends actually look like. In the last five years, most faculties have had increases in vacancies compared with the long-term average, in both year start and year end. The year start numbers represent decreases in March election participation, while the year end numbers may indicate either decreases in by-election participation, increases in resignations, or a combination of both.

Resignations

Students' Council has always been subject to resignations. In order to find out if resignations correlate with faculty, we compared total and normalized resignations in all faculties.

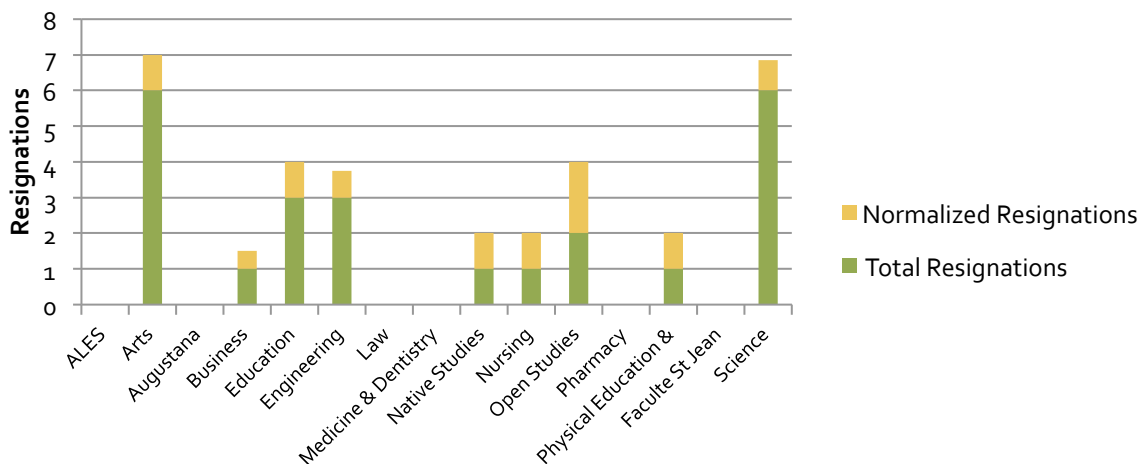
Students' Council Resignations (2004 - 2015)



(Figure 2-4 Resignations in Students' Council)

At first it appears as if there are some faculties with a resignation issue. However, if the number of resignations is normalized with the average number of seats, resignations are consistently around the same frequency in most faculties. This shows that issues with vacancies are not centric to resignations and the amount of resignations is acceptable.

Students' Council Resignations (2011 - 2015)



(Figure 2-5 Resignations in Students' Council)

If we restrict the time period of our data to the previous five years, we can understand more recent resignation trends. Compared with long-term averages, some faculties have reduced their resignations, resignations from Open Studies have become more prevalent, and the rest have stayed the same relative to each other. Therefore, the recent increase in vacancies is likely a result of a decrease in election participation, and not an increase in resignations.

3. General Faculties Council

Introduction to GFC

The General Faculties Council is one of the highest governing bodies of the University of Alberta. It is given its authority through the Alberta Post Secondary Learning Act and is subject to the authority of the Board of Governors in its many decisions. The General Faculties Council has the power to approve the University's Academic Plan, academic programs, academic policies, academic awards, the University Calendar, and to grant degrees.

The General Faculties Council has 10 standing committees, however the undergraduate membership on them is either Students' Union Executive, or appointed students at large so the focus of the data will be on students elected to the general council of the body.ⁱⁱⁱ

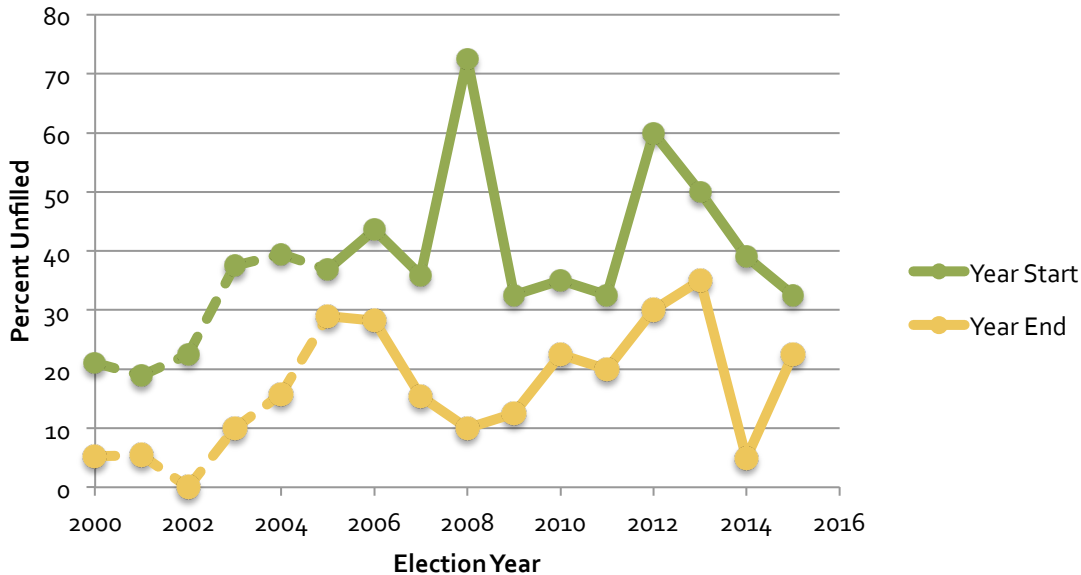
Composition

On the General Faculties Council alone, students have as much as one third of the vote, but undergraduate seats have been consistently not filled for the last 10 Years. There are 158 total seats currently on the General Faculties Council, of which 40 seats are undergraduate student seats. The remaining seats are filled by graduate students, administrators, deans, professors, librarians and both academic and non-academic staff. Evident by the sheer voting power that students have on the General Faculties Council, filling vacancies is in the best interest of all students and stakeholders in any decision made at the University of Alberta.

Vacancies

Data was collected on appointments to the General Faculties Council from 2000-2015, however resignations were not included in the data analysis due to their difficulty to track. It is important to note that the data before 2005 is inaccurate as the distribution of seats was not available.

Percentage of Unfilled GFC Seats (2000-2015)



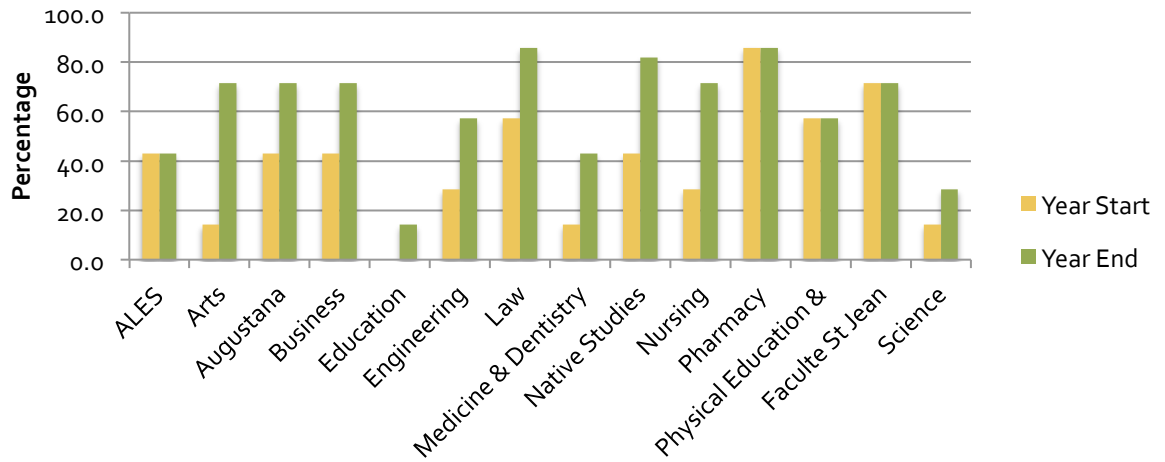
(Figure 3-1 Overall Annual Percentages of Unfilled GFC Seats)^{iv}

Figure 3-1 shows over time vacancies have fluctuated despite there being the same number and a similar distribution of seats. It is difficult at this time to understand what causes these fluctuations, but we hope to see vacancies stabilize and decrease over the next few years as the SU institutionalizes vacancy petitions and devotes more resources to promoting GFC representation.

Breakdown

The 40 seats on the General Faculties Council are proportionally assigned in a way similar to Students’ Council except there is no open studies representation, and it is reassessed less frequently. The data on years without vacancies since the year 2000 was put into a visual to compare the effectiveness of by-elections and to identify which faculties have a poor filling of seats.

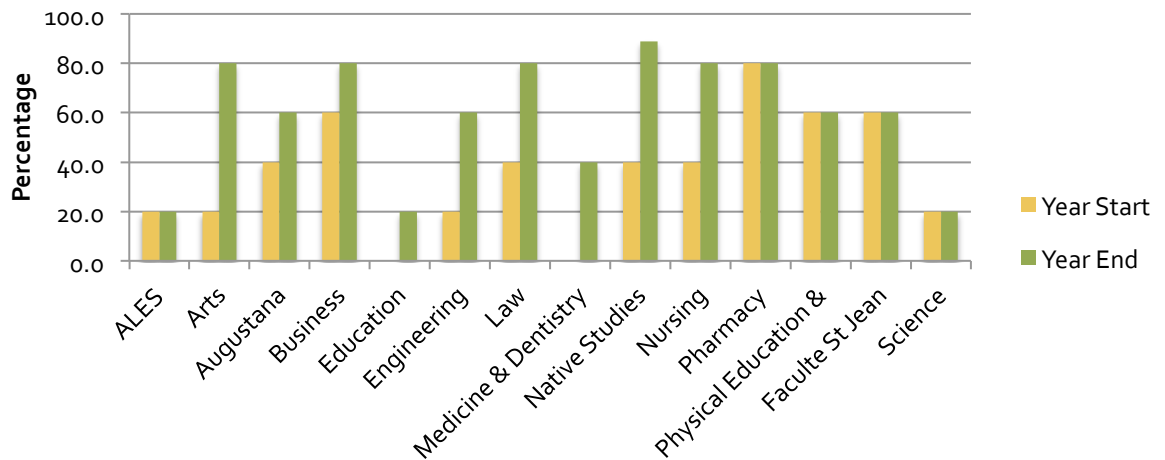
Percent of Years Without GFC Vacancies (2009 - Present)



(Figure 3-2 Percent of years of GFC with no Vacancies per Faculty)

In Figure 3-2, it is shown that since 2009 many faculties have had consistently poor filling of seats. In addition to this, it is visualized that since 2009, there has not been one faculty that has had its seats completely filled every year. This follows the trend of the previous figures, showing the average frequency of vacancies in GFC is quite high.

Percent of Years Without GFC Vacancies (2011-2015)



(Figure 3-3 Percent of years of GFC with no Vacancies per Faculty)

When we restrict the data to the previous five years only, we can see that while the average vacancies seems to be improving in a couple faculties, it is actually getting worse in most of them, with only one faculty filling their seats more than 80% of the time. One thing that remains consistent, though, is the clear importance and utility of our September by-elections in filling student seats on GFC.

Endnotes

- i. "Why Represent? Focus Group", 201210231_SGO_Focus Groups 1 & 2 Synthesis.doc, University of Alberta Students' Union, August 29, 2012.
- ii. "Archived Documents and Recordings"
<http://su.ualberta.ca/governance/council/archive/> last accessed June 23, 2014.
- iii. "General Faculties Council"
<http://governance.ualberta.ca/en/GeneralFacultiesCouncil.aspx> last accessed June 23, 2014.
- iv. "GFC Minutes"
<http://governance.ualberta.ca/GeneralFacultiesCouncil/GFC/GFCMinutes.aspx> last accessed June 23, 2014.



