OVERVIEW OF ROBERT’S RULES OF ORDER
Submitted by Matt Traum, GSC Representative At-Large on July 31, 2002

MOTIVATION

The perception currently exists within Graduate Student Council (GSC) that incorporating standard rules of order for the council’s decision-making bodies will impede the progress of business. On the contrary, use of rules of order has proven itself as a means of conducting business in a rapid, organized fashion in federal and state legislatures, corporate governing bodies, and student governments including the M.I.T. Undergraduate Association.

Included among the goals for the council in 2002-2003 is the provision of more GSC accountability and the fostering of greater involvement by GSC representatives. Use of rules of order will create accountability by providing a clear means to outline decisions and initiatives engendered by the Executive Committee (ExComm) and General Council Meetings (GCM). In addition rules of order will encourage greater involvement in the council by representatives. They will have a means through which to voice their opinions and ideas as well as serve as a collective legislative body from which the GSC’s mandate should originate.

This document is authored with the recognition that rules of order and parliamentary procedure are new to most members of the council. The council’s lack of experience using rules of order is currently a hindrance to successfully employing parliamentary procedure at ExComm and GCM. However, when utilized correctly, rules of order can significantly speed up meetings and eliminate confusion and bureaucracy. This document presents a standard modified set of parliamentary procedures that dispenses with the formality and complexity of Robert’s Rules of Order while maintaining the sense of etiquette and equanimity necessary for business to be conducted in an orderly fashion.

PHILOSOPHY

A deliberative assembly is a gathering of equals in a decision-making body whose size makes simple conversational etiquette unruly. When assembled for meetings, ExComm and GCM are deliberative assemblies.

Rules or order are applied to deliberative assemblies to assure the following rights of members:

- Full and free discussion of actions to be taken in the name of the group
- Freedom to express his/her opinion in open, public debate without ridicule
- The opinion of each member present has equal weight, as expressed by vote
- Failure to concur in a decision does not constitute withdrawal from the body
- The minority is free to voice objections without fear of scorn

The philosophy of equality and mutual respect is fundamental to parliamentary procedure. The right of all members to be treated with respect is paramount, and members are encouraged to speak up if their privileges are violated.
TERMS AND CONCEPTS

The following section highlights the important definitions and concepts fundamental to conducting business via rules of order.

Privileges of Members

The GSC Constitution outlines the provisions for voting membership in ExComm and in GCM. While these meetings are open to the public, duly recognized voting members enjoy certain privileges over guests in attendance.

Voting members may speak in debate, sponsor resolutions, make and second motions, raise points, and vote on motions and resolutions. Guests have the privilege of speaking in debate only and may not utilize any other parliamentary forms reserved for members.

The Chair

All business in deliberative assemblies is conducted through an individual who orchestrates the meeting. This individual is generically referred to as the Chair. The Chair is responsible for assuring that the basic rights of all members are upheld by running the meeting in an objective, judicious fashion.

As an objective facilitator, the Chair is not allowed to express any opinion on the business that is being conducted. Should a situation arise in which the Chair is forced to convey his or her opinion on an item of business, the individual must relinquish the Chair to the GSC President (or next ranking executive officer present) until the business upon which the opinion was expressed is decided upon.

To prevent confusion or talking out of turn, it is the Chair’s responsibility to recognize members by allowing them to speak, make motions, or raise points. To assure that everyone has a chance to be heard, members are expected to raise their hand when they wish to speak and remain silent until they are called upon by the Chair.

In addition, all debate, resolutions, motions, and points should be directed to the Chair to eliminate direct ridicule from one member to another. In short, all members should speak to the Chair, not each other. This practice assures that the value of ideas alone is debated and that comments do not extend to the merit of individuals presenting them.

Consider the following example. Assume the representative from Mechanical Engineering just suggested that GSC allocate $100,000 to fund his private birthday party. A representative from Biology might be tempted to turn to the Mechanical Engineering representative and say, “You are a lunatic!”

Instead, it is proper for the Biology representative to raise her hand, wait to be recognized by the Chair, and say something like, “Mr. Chairperson, the Mechanical Engineering representative’s suggestion constitutes pure lunacy.”
Quorum

According to the GSC Constitution, a majority of voting individuals must be present at a meeting for business to officially take place. This minimum necessary number of voting members is called a quorum. By definition, a majority constitutes fifty percent of the voting members plus one individual.

For a more concrete illustration of quorum, consider the following example. There are currently 42 voting members of GCM. Quorum would not be achieved if 21 members turned up to a meeting because 21 is only fifty percent of 42. However, when the 22nd member shows up, the meeting can start. Consider the case that there are 51 voting members, 26 members present is not quorum because fifty percent of 51 plus one individual is 27.

Once a meeting has achieved quorum, business can proceed. Although members have the “privilege” of leaving a meeting whenever they need to, it is generally accepted that business can continue even if the total number of voting members present waivers slightly below quorum. It is ultimately the responsibility of the Chair to halt business when he/she feels that the number of members present has fallen far below quorum. Members who leave without informing the Chair by raising a point of personal privilege are assumed to have abandoned the assembly and will be removed from the quorum count. Members who leave permanently before the meeting is adjourned incur the same attendance penalty as members who are absent with notice.

What should a deliberative assembly do if a meeting has been called and not enough voting members have shown up to make quorum? No business can be conducted until quorum is established. An assembly without quorum can take one of two actions: 1) wait until enough members show up to start the meeting, or 2) adjourn the meeting automatically. Simply put, business cannot be conducted unless quorum is achieved.

Agenda

All meetings have agendas. This brief outline of what is to be discussed keeps the meeting flowing smoothly and prevents discussion from getting off-topic. ExComm and GCMs also operate under agendas that dictate the order in which business will be conducted.

The generic accepted agenda for all GSC meetings is as follows:

I. Bureaucratic Procedure
   A. Call to Order
   B. Introductions/Attendance
   C. Passing the Guest List
   D. Approval of Previous Minutes

II. Old Business

III. New Business
IV. Officer/Committee Reports
V. Final Announcements
VI. Adjournment

The Floor

In order to eliminate confusion associated multiple members talking at once, parliamentary procedure insists that individuals be recognized by the Chair one at a time if they wish to speak. The distinction of being selected to speak is known as holding the floor.

By default, the Chair holds the floor until he or she recognizes another member to speak. Once the member is recognized, the Chair yields the floor, allowing the member to speak freely. Once the speaker is finished, the Chair takes up the floor again. As business proceeds the floor is continuously occupied by either the Chair or the member speaking. To hold the floor, a member must raise his or her hand to be recognized by the Chair.

The privilege of holding the floor carries with it a few restrictions. First, no individual member may take the floor to speak on a single matter of business more than twice in a session. Second, a member holding the floor must confine his or her comments to a time limit of five minutes. Both of these restrictions are in place to assure that individual members do not waste the assembly’s time by dwelling on a single subject for a longer period of time than is reasonable. It is the responsibility of the Chair to gently enforce restrictions of holding the floor.

Resolutions

All major decisions of a deliberative assembly to take action originate as resolutions. A resolution is a written document that introduces a substantive question as a new subject for consideration by the assembly. In short, a resolution is a written suggestion that action be taken. The member of the assembly who generates the resolution is called the sponsor.

Resolutions contain two sections: a preamble and set of motions. The preamble provides basic background and describes why a particular resolution should be adopted. The set of motions outlines exactly what actions are to be taken, provided the resolution passes. An example resolution is provided in the appendix of this document for reference.

In order to be considered, resolutions must be submitted to the Chair in electronic format at least five days in advance of the meeting in which they will be introduced. In addition, new resolutions must have a second. A second is the endorsement by a second member that the resolution should be considered. New resolutions will be placed on the agenda by the Chair and considered in the order in which they are received.

It is appropriate to allow a deliberative assembly time to consider a resolution before it is debated and voted upon. Thus, all new resolutions will be introduced on the agenda under New Business,
and they will be given a first reading. The first reading consists of the resolution’s sponsor taking the floor to read aloud the wording of the resolution. After the first reading, it is appropriate to put off consideration of the resolution to the next subsequent meeting. This process is called Tabling a resolution. It is also appropriate to ask a committee to review the resolution outside of the deliberative assembly. This process is called Charging a Committee. Tabling and Charging a Committee are motions that will be discussed in the Motions section.

Once the deliberative assembly has had time to consider a resolution, it can be taken from the table or released from committee to be debated and voted upon. A pending resolution ready for consideration appears on the agenda under Old Business.

**Debate**

Debate is the process that occurs while a deliberative assembly is trying to decide how to handle a resolution up for consideration. While a resolution is up for debate, the deliberative assembly can be thought of generically as broken up into three parts: the proponents, the opponents, and the neutrals. As their names imply, the proponents are the group who intend to vote “Yes” on the resolution, the opponents are the group who intend to vote “No”, and the neutrals are those who are undecided. The purpose of debate is for the proponents and opponents to convince the neutrals to vote with their particular group.

Once a resolution is up for consideration, members have the opportunity to speak in favor or against the resolution. While the resolution’s sponsor is granted the right to speak first, any member may subsequently hold the floor to speak on the merits or disadvantages of a resolution. Generally, it is the Chair’s responsibility to recognize alternate speakers from the proponent and opponent sides until all members who want to speak in the debate have had an opportunity to do so. Also, the Chair will generally recognize new speakers before recognizing a member who wishes to speak for a second time.

**Motions**

While resolutions are being debated, members have at their disposal a set of tools they may use to modify, manipulate, and improve the resolution before it is ultimately voted on. These tools are referred to as motions.

In a similar fashion that members must hold the floor to speak in debate, they must also hold the floor to make motions. Members may not interrupt speakers who have the floor to make motions.

While motions can be raised at any time during debate while no one has the floor, they are considered in a particular order with respect to one another, hence the term “rules of order.” The order in which motions are considered is directly related to how much they modify or manipulate the resolution being debated. In other words, each motion has a rank associated with it, which measures its weight and significance as compared against other motions.

For example, a member from Physics might make a motion to affect a small change in a resolution. While that small change is being debated, a member from Operations Research might
motion to affect a larger change. Following the rules of order, the larger change has a higher rank and would be debated first. Once the large change is resolved, debate would continue on the smaller change, provided it still exists given the affect of the larger modification. Making a motion of lower rank than the motion pending before the assembly is called “out of order”, and is prevented from happening by the Chair.

Consideration of any motion takes precedence over the resolution before the assembly. In addition, higher ranking motions take precedence over lower ranking motions. If a number of motions are raised, they are considered according to their rank, until they are disposed of. Then consideration returns to the original resolution. In certain cases, motions may be adopted which dispose of the resolution before it can be voted on. If this case occurs, business proceeds to the next item on the agenda.

There are three types of motions, each bearing different characteristics. The three classes of motions are Subsidiary Motions, Incidental Motions, and Privileged Motions. While a brief description of each motion type is provided here, the appendix of this document includes a table describing all motions that can be used in GSC meetings along with a brief explanation of each motion. Note that Robert’s Rules of Order outlines a number of additional motions, but the motions contained herein have been selected as those necessary for the proper conduct of business at ExComm and GCM.

Subsidiary Motions

These motions are applied to resolutions to modify them or dispose of them. Once a subsidiary motion is made and seconded, it must be decided before the resolution upon which the motion was made can be acted upon.

In order of rank from lowest to highest the subsidiary motions are Postpone Indefinitely, Amend, Charge a Committee, Modify Debate, End Debate, Vote by Ballot, Vote by Roll Call, and Lay on the Table.

Incidental Motions

These motions arise when members feel that actions or decisions based on other motions, resolutions, or orders are in opposition to the benefit of the assembly. Incidental motions are made when a course of action being taken seems to be against the will of the majority, and they serve as a mechanism through which such action can be halted before it becomes dangerous or disruptive to the continued proper conduct of business.

All Incidental Motions take precedence over Subsidiary Motions. In order of rank from lowest to highest the Incidental Motions are Appeal, Object to Consideration, Withdraw, Suspend Rules, and Division of a Question.

Privileged Motions
Privileged Motions are in place to prevent the rights of the minority from abuse through the elimination of deliberation time outside of the assembly or by holding members in an assembly past the expected time of adjournment.

All Incidental Motions take precedence over Subsidiary Motions and Incidental Motions. In order of rank from lowest to highest the Privileged Motions are Recess and Adjourn.

A Note on Dilatory Motions

Parliamentary procedure exists to assure that the business of a deliberative assembly is conducted in a coherent, timely fashion. Any motion that is deemed obstructive to the procedure of business is called a dilatory motion.

It is the duty of the Chair to prevent members from misusing motions or abusing the privilege of renewing certain motions to obstruct the flow of business. Consider the example of a disgruntled committee chair who felt he did not get enough funding in the budget. This individual could continuously move that the budget be tabled, against the will of the assembly, obstructing the flow of business.

If the Chair becomes convinced that members are using parliamentary forms for obstructive purposes, he or she has the right to not recognize the members in question, preventing them from holding the floor. However, such a course cannot be adopted to speed up business, nor should the Chair let personal feelings affect his or her judgment in such cases.

Rising Points

One of the fundamental pillars of parliamentary procedure is to preserve and assure individual rights. Thus, members are empowered to raise points to protect themselves, ensure their understanding of the business at hand, and excuse themselves temporarily to handle pending business.

Because the preservation of members’ rights is paramount, members may raise points irrespective of whether the floor is occupied or not. In fact, the only time members are allowed to interrupt the conduct of business is to raise a point. Thus, this privilege should be used sparingly, only when necessary.

Point of Information

Points of Information should be raised when a member of the deliberative assembly knows information fundamental to a resolution or motion being debated that will sway the opinion of the assembly. This point can also be used to correct information that is presented vaguely or incorrectly. In general this point is used to assure that the assembly is educated on a resolution or motion upon which they are deciding.

For example, consider a situation in which ExComm is debating on whether to hold a reception for new students in Morss Hall. The sponsor, the Orientation Chair, has outlined in the resolution
that the event is to take place on September 1. However, the Activities Chair has made a motion to amend the date of the reception to September 8. Unbeknownst to the assembly, Morss Hall will be closed for renovation on September 8. As the amendment is being presented, the GSC Treasurer, who is in the know about the Morss Hall renovation, might say the following: "Point of information, Morss Hall will be closed for renovation on September 8." The Activities Chair presenting the amendment is then at liberty to withdraw or modify the amendment before the assembly’s time is wasted debated the September 8 question.

*Point of Parliamentary Inquiry*

A member should raise a Point of Parliamentary Inquiry when the conduct of business has become unclear, when he or she wants to inquire as to the affects of a certain motion, or when he or she is unclear as to what outcome a particular vote will have.

*Point of Personal Privilege*

During the course of a meeting, members may be inclined to leave momentarily to take care of important pending business. Such business could include conferring with a constituent outside the meeting room, answering an important cell phone call, or going to the bathroom. To insure that the Chair can keep an accurate active quorum count, members who are engaging in these privileged activities need to indicate that they are leaving the assembly temporarily by raising a point of personal privilege. Members who leave without raising a point of personal privilege are assumed to have abandoned the assembly and will be removed from the quorum count.

*Voting*

At ExComm and GCM, all resolutions and motions are decided by a majority vote unless otherwise stated in the Constitution or Bylaws. Votes of “Yes”, “No”, and “Abstain” are appropriate. Although it is the duty of every member who has an opinion on the question before the assembly to express it by a vote, members cannot be compelled to vote. All members who do not vote “Yes” or “No” elect to abstain from a vote.

It is proper for members to abstain from voting on questions of direct personal interest, but this imperative should not prevent a member from voting on questions affecting oneself. For example, a member should abstain from a vote on whether to employ a company with which he or she is affiliated to revamp the GSC Web site. However, members should feel include to vote for themselves if nominated to serve as the chair of a GSC committee.

Votes at ExComm and GCM are taken by show of hands. The Chair will first call for those voting in the affirmative, then for those voting in the negative, then for abstentions. The count of each call will be taken by the Chair and verified by the GSC Secretary. Once a vote is taken, the result and the subsequent affect on the pending resolution or motion will be announced by the chair.

*Tie Votes and the Chair’s Vote*
If the Chair is a voting member of the assembly, he or she may vote in three cases: 1) when a vote is conducted by secret ballot, 2) when the Chair’s vote will break a tie, and 3) when a chair’s vote will create a tie, causing the vote to fail.

**Voting By Ballot**

A vote by ballot is used when secrecy of the members’ votes is desired. For example, ballots should be utilized when electing officers. In other circumstances where secrecy is desired, a vote by ballot can be ordered any member through the motion for Vote by Ballot.

**Voting By Roll Call**

Taking a vote by roll call has the affect of placing on the record how each member voted. In short, it has the exact opposite affect of a Vote by Ballot. A Vote by Roll Call can be ordered by a motion, and is often used to coerce members to vote a certain way, knowing that their constituents will be able to see how they voted. Voting by Roll Call is the only motion that does not require a majority vote to pass, since it would be useless for the majority to force itself to go on record. Instead, the motion for a Vote by Roll Call requires a second and a third.

If the motion for a Vote by Roll Call succeeds, the chair calls the roll of members present in alphabetical order. Members may respond verbally in four ways: “Yes”, “No”, “abstain”, or “pass”. The members’ votes are recorded as the roll continues. Those members who exercise the right to pass will be called again in order when the first round of the roll call reaches the bottom of the attendance list. Members may pass one time only.

**Proxy and Absentee Voting**

Members who are not present at a particular meeting may send an individual to represent their interests. This individual is called a proxy. According to the GSC Bylaws, members must notify the Chair of their proxy by written request. During the initial roll call to achieve quorum, proxies must announce themselves when the name of the member they represent is called. Proxies enjoy all of the privileges of membership in the deliberative assembly for the session in which they are representing the absent member.

Another option for a member who is not present at a particular meeting is to send a message to the GSC Secretary prior to the meeting indicating his or her preference to vote with the majority on all resolutions and motions that come before the assembly. This process is called a basket absentee endorsement. The member making the basket absentee endorsement is counted as present at the meeting and counts towards quorum.
# EXPLICATIVE TABLES OF MOTIONS AND POINTS

## Motions to be Utilized at GSC Meetings

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rank</th>
<th>Motion Name</th>
<th>Motion Type</th>
<th>Translation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Adjourn</td>
<td>Privileged</td>
<td>End the meeting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Recess</td>
<td>Privileged</td>
<td>Briefly postpone the meeting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Appeal</td>
<td>Incidental</td>
<td>Open a questionable decision by the Chair to a vote by the assembly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Object to Consideration</td>
<td>Incidental</td>
<td>Halt the introduction of a resolution or motion inappropriate for consideration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Withdraw</td>
<td>Incidental</td>
<td>Retract a resolution or motion already under consideration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Suspend Rules</td>
<td>Incidental</td>
<td>Ignore the rules of order to consider urgent business</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Division of a Question</td>
<td>Incidental</td>
<td>Vote on various parts of a resolution separately</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Lay on the Table</td>
<td>Subsidiary</td>
<td>Postpone discussion on a resolution or motion to a later time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Vote by Roll Call</td>
<td>Subsidiary</td>
<td>Vote by recorded, verbal roll call</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Vote by Ballot</td>
<td>Subsidiary</td>
<td>Vote by secret ballot</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>End Debate</td>
<td>Subsidiary</td>
<td>Immediately end debate and go to the vote</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Modify Debate</td>
<td>Subsidiary</td>
<td>Extend or limit debate on a certain motion or resolution</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>Charge a Committee</td>
<td>Subsidiary</td>
<td>Send a resolution to a committee for review</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>Amend</td>
<td>Subsidiary</td>
<td>Modify a resolution or motion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>Postpone Indefinitely</td>
<td>Subsidiary</td>
<td>Dispose of a resolution or motion without vote</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

## Points that can be Raised at GSC Meetings

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rank</th>
<th>Point Name</th>
<th>Motion Type</th>
<th>Translation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>NA</td>
<td>Point of information</td>
<td>Privileged</td>
<td>I would like to add the following key information to the debate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NA</td>
<td>Point of Parliamentary Inquiry</td>
<td>Privileged</td>
<td>I would like clarification the following aspect of parliamentary procedure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NA</td>
<td>Point of Personal Privilege</td>
<td>Privileged</td>
<td>I need to leave briefly to conduct personal business, I will return shortly</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>