



## *A Protocol for Using Electronic Messaging to Facilitate Academic Committee Deliberations*

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**ABSTRACT** *In this paper we offer a protocol for electronic deliberations that honors the rights of committee members and is consistent with Robert's Rules of Order. Implementing a formal protocol for electronic deliberations by academic committees ensures that all committee members will have an opportunity to participate fully in the committee's deliberations. In this way, electronic deliberations can provide as much opportunity for achieving a consensus as in-person meetings, while also offering the convenience associated with electronic communication. Should electronic deliberations not appear to be working in a particular situation, this protocol provides a mechanism for calling an in-person meeting, thereby providing the best of both worlds.*

### **Introduction**

Committee work is generally the most important and time-consuming service activity performed by faculty members in a college or university. To the extent that shared governance between administration and faculty is a reality, the work of committees is an indispensable part of the faculty contribution to governance. Although those committees may report to a larger senate or assembly, where final decisions are made, it is in the committee that the details of legislation and proposals are worked out.

If individual faculty members wish to have a voice in institutional governance, they must sit on and contribute to the deliberations of committees. But meetings can be time-consuming, inefficient, and difficult or impossible to fit into the schedules of all committee members. As a result, an increasing number of committees are using electronic messaging (usually in its simplest form: e-mail) as an adjunct mechanism for conducting deliberations. The aim of this paper is to develop a process by which academic deliberations can be conducted electronically in a fair and efficient manner.

The use of electronic messaging for committee deliberations is typically instituted in an informal and *ad hoc* manner, which may work as long as all members of a committee are equally comfortable with this approach. It may, however, cause some committee members to feel that they are no longer as able to influence the decision-making process.

In extreme cases, the use of electronic messaging for committee deliberations may functionally exclude particular members from contributing to a given deliberation. This problem is not of course unique to electronic deliberations. If the time decided upon for regular meetings works for all but one of the members of a committee, that person will of course be effectively excluded from the deliberations. Nevertheless, functional exclusion is a potential liability of electronic deliberations that should not be ignored.

Moreover, the constitutions and/or by-laws of the faculty legislative bodies at many colleges and universities stipulate that committee deliberations are to be conducted according to Robert's Rules of Order. The most commonly referenced version of these rules is Robert's Rules of Order Newly Revised (RONR), which is the only edition recognized by The National Association of Parliamentarians and the American Institute of Parliamentarians as being authoritative on parliamentary procedure. Although RONR is most widely used in the United States, it is based on established principles of parliamentary procedure that are observed internationally.

The most recent, ninth edition of this work, published in 1991, makes definite stipulations concerning what committees can and should do in meetings as opposed to by means of other forms of deliberation (such as electronic messaging). RONR clearly defines a meeting as a period of time during which members of a committee are gathered *in one place*. According to this definition, electronic deliberations do not constitute a meeting, and so committees that are bound to conduct business according to RONR are limited in what they can and cannot do by means of electronic deliberations. Unfortunately, few committee chairs are conversant enough with RONR to ensure that their use of electronic deliberations is consistent with them.

For these reasons, there is a need for a standard protocol to govern the use of electronic messaging in facilitating committee deliberations. With a proper protocol, a committee could use electronic messaging as the default vehicle for its deliberations and still do justice to the accepted role of committees in institutional governance. In this article, we propose such a protocol, using RONR as the benchmark descriptor of the committee process. We have endeavored to make this protocol consistent with current standards for the operations of academic deliberative bodies, while taking advantage of the technologies available through computer networking of personnel. We have incorporated a certain amount of flexibility in recognition of the realities of decision-making in a crowded academic schedule. This protocol could of course be modified to suit the needs and tastes of the members of a given committee, as long as the open and fair nature of deliberations is not thereby compromised.

### **Why Electronic Messaging is Often used to Facilitate Committee Deliberations**

Since faculty governance is ostensibly embraced by accrediting agencies, administrators, and trustees, it is important that faculty demonstrate an ability to conduct business and arrive at decisions in an efficient, fair-minded manner (Bérubé, 1999). Effectively managing the burden of committee work takes on added importance given inevitable limitations on faculty time, especially considering that one's primary professional obligations are to one's students and academic discipline. Electronic deliberations offer a mechanism through which faculty can optimize their efforts and devote more time to higher order obligations.

Electronic mail uses computer text-processing and communication tools to permit

high-speed, information exchange. Although it is the least sophisticated form of electronic communication, it is the most widely used in both corporate and academic settings (see Grohowski *et al.*, 1990, D'Souza, 1992; Kremers, 1996; Carlozzi, 1999). In a 1989 survey academicians listed collaborative research as their primary reason for using electronic mail (D'Souza & Smith, 1989). Since then, its uses have expanded into pedagogy and university administration (e.g., D'Souza, 1992; Cartwright & Kovacs, 1995).

In addition to electronic mail, more advanced hardware and software systems are available to promote both communication and decision-making in organizations. For example, electronic meeting systems (EMS) are technology-based systems that incorporate elaborate software designed to promote creativity, 'brainstorming' and consensus building by providing opportunity for anonymous input or varying levels of access to user input. Generally speaking, the effects of EMS on group processes reported in the literature are positive. For example, Kay (1994, 1995) has reported that electronic brainstorming techniques enhance teamwork, and increase the quantity and quality of generated ideas.

Pinsonneault and Kraemer (1990), in reviewing the literature on the effects of electronic meetings on group processes and outcomes, have categorized electronic systems as either communication support systems or decision support systems. The former primarily support the communication process, while the latter are designed to facilitate group decision processes as well. While both types of systems increase the depth of group analysis, increase participation, decrease domination by a few members, and increase decision quality, decision support systems also have positive effects on consensus building, decision time, group satisfaction, and confidence in decisions.

A standardized protocol for electronic deliberation based on accepted meeting practices effectively transforms a communication support system, such as electronic mail, into a decision support system thereby increasing its benefits. This has been noted by Donelan (1993), who suggests the use of Robert's Rules of Order as an analytical structure for helping groups reach goals in an electronic setting, but does not elaborate on how it might actually be implemented. In the context of electronic brainstorming, Aiken *et al.* (1997) provide additional evidence that process and technology have synergistic effects on meeting outcomes (see also Jarvenpaa *et al.*, 1988; Easton *et al.*, 1990). In a similar vein, Creighton and Adams (1998) note that effectively managing cybercollaboration involves matching the technology, process and facility to the type of meeting.

Although conferencing via electronic mail is the least sophisticated form of electronic communication, it is far more widely used in the academic environment than any given EMS. While more elaborate forms of EMS have their uses, the deliberations of an academic committee on any given issue are seldom so complex or protracted as to necessitate the use of a more sophisticated system than electronic mail. Given its applicability, the simplicity of electronic mail is in fact an advantage, since academicians are unlikely to be functionally excluded from the decision process through feeling overawed by the technology involved. For these reasons, electronic mail is now widely used to facilitate the deliberations of academic committees. And whereas more sophisticated forms of EMS are commonly used in corporate settings, academicians seldom use them.

### **The Strengths and Weaknesses of Electronic Deliberations**

Electronic deliberations offer a host of advantages, as well as some disadvantages, over

physical meetings. For example, physical committee meetings can be particularly difficult to organize. Building a quorum during normal business hours is sometimes impossible, since the times at which faculty are most likely to be available are also the most common class times. The problem is exacerbated when committee members are reluctant to meet outside normal business hours. Even when a quorum is achieved, some individuals' schedules may make them chronic absentees and limit their contribution to the group. Electronic deliberations allow members to provide input at their convenience and eliminate scheduling conflicts. If an electronic messaging system permits remote access, members need not even be on campus to participate.

Individual contributions tend to be more germane and thoughtful in electronic deliberations than face-to-face meetings for several reasons (see, for example, Pinsonneault & Kraemer, 1990; Kay, 1994, 1995). First, traditional meetings often get 'off-track' as members introduce tangential information and opinions into the deliberation process. Inevitably, another member is inspired to offer further input, and the meeting leader must re-focus the group on the matter at hand after valuable time has elapsed. By requiring written input, electronic deliberations encourage participants to explicitly consider the relevance of their contribution. Second, the exercise of typing one's thoughts encourages one to provide a cogent presentation, which strengthens well-reasoned arguments. Finally, those committee members who are more intimidated by strong personalities or less apt to think creatively in a spontaneous setting are afforded the opportunity to more deliberately develop their comments and are more likely to provide input. Studies report almost universally that electronic meeting systems decrease the tendency for a few members of the group to dominate the process (Pinsonneault & Kraemer, 1990).

Electronic deliberations also alleviate the need for the chairperson or secretary to keep meeting minutes. Most EMS and e-mail software permits the archiving of correspondence, which functions as an unbiased and accurate record of the deliberation process. Additionally, removing the secretarial responsibility from a group member permits that member to be a more active participant in the deliberations. The use of attachments in cyber-conferencing also facilitates the distribution of documents for committee members to review, alleviating the need to physically copy and mail documents to each member.

Although typing an electronic message is undoubtedly more time consuming than speaking the very same words in a given message, electronic deliberations are actually more expedient than physical meetings (Pinsonneault & Kraemer, 1990; Kay, 1994, 1995). Not only does typing a message encourage a more parsimonious and efficient use of language than speaking, it is more expedient to read arguments than to hear them presented by their author. It eliminates the need to ask a speaker to repeat him/herself, and members can allocate their most convenient time to participating in deliberations (Aiken *et al.*, 1997). Electronic deliberations also eliminate travel time to and from meetings as well as perquisite idle conversation necessary to begin almost any meeting.

This innovative form of consultation has drawbacks, however. For example, to the extent that we enjoy the company of our colleagues and the idle conversation that launches traditional meetings, we sacrifice some degree of camaraderie through electronic deliberations. One also loses the benefit of body language in communicating electronically, although this drawback is at least partially offset by the discipline and thought process required to type communiqués, especially for academics. Finally, electronic deliberation is perhaps not suitable for complex issues that may require certain amounts of uninterrupted time to develop solutions.

### Committee Work According to Robert's Rules of Order

Although researches have documented the benefits of using technology to enhance the efficiency of meeting time and quality of outcomes, an overlooked area of investigation seems to be the establishment of an electronic meeting protocol that ensures (or at least encourages) fair and orderly proceedings in traditional deliberative settings. Since the protocol we propose applies to the deliberations of academic committees, we will first review the nature of committees and their deliberations according to RONR.

RONR describes committees as, 'a body of one or more persons, elected or appointed by (or by direction of) an assembly or society, to consider, investigate, or take action on certain matters or subjects, or to do all of these things (§49).' Committees are distinguished from boards in that they generally have, 'less authority to act independently for the society.' Usually, this means that they do not decide matters themselves but only deliberate on issues and report their findings to an assembly for final vote. Because committees are usually considerably smaller than assemblies, RONR also recommends a more informal set of procedures for governing meetings, eliminating a number of the procedures for regulating discussions, offering motions, putting matters to a vote, etc. (§48).

A committee's job is to deliberate. It adds value through the time each member spends considering the issue at hand and through the process of group discussion through which divergent views are enabled to work on each other to achieve a compromise view. If a committee comprises representatives of all of the major constituencies in a society, then a compromise that is acceptable to the members of that committee should also be acceptable to the society as a whole.

The most common mechanism for deliberation in committees is the meeting, which RONR defines as 'a single official gathering of its members in one room or area to transact business for a length of time during which there is no cessation of proceedings and the members do not separate, unless for a short recess (§8).' Depending on the nature and charge of a committee, meetings may occur at regular times or they may be called as necessary. Committees may also hold hearings, in which members of the society at large are permitted to present their views on a particular subject, but only members of a committee have 'the right to be present' during actual deliberations. Meetings of a committee are generally called by its chair, but a committee must also meet whenever any two of its members call for a meeting (§49). Committee members should be informed of, 'the time, place, and exact purpose,' of meetings by mail and with 'reasonable' advance notice (§9).

Although committees are permitted to conduct deliberations outside of meetings (such as by means of electronic deliberations), RONR does place specific limitations on what material can be incorporated into a committee's reports to the greater assembly. Such reports, 'can contain only what has been agreed to by a majority vote at a regular or properly called meeting.' A further statement does however provide that, 'if it is impractical to bring its members together for a meeting, the report of the committee can contain what has been agreed to by every one of its members.'

Given that electronic deliberations are not meetings, the above stipulations require that any material to be included in the report of a committee must either be voted on in an actual meeting or must be agreed to by a *unanimous* electronic vote of the committee. This is a significant limitation if a committee wishes to conduct business electronically yet is required to operate according to RONR. In such cases, any of the following scenarios are, in our opinion, consistent with RONR:

- The committee can elect to deliberate electronically but to meet for purposes of voting.
- The committee chair can move to have the constitution and/or by-laws of the faculty assembly modified to permit inclusion in committee reports of material agreed upon by a majority electronic vote of a committee's members.
- The chair can obtain the agreement from all members of the committee that votes will be conducted electronically, and that subsequent to a vote all committee members who were in the minority will consent to the inclusion of the majority decision in the report of the committee, even though they may not be swayed by the majority opinion.

This last option could be considered a controversial application of RONR, in that it converts any majority vote into a *de facto* unanimous vote. In our opinion, it does not subvert the intent of RONR, so long as each member of a committee freely gives their consent to the inclusion of each majority decision in the committee's report. This consent must not of course be obtained by pressure or intimidation, and all members of the committee must understand that they can at any time refuse to consent to the inclusion in a report of particular material to which they strongly object. Should they refuse, the committee would be compelled to meet for additional deliberations and a final majority vote, following which the material could legally be included in the committee's report. When a member consents to the inclusion of the majority decision in the report of the committee, they are merely accepting that it is the will of the majority regardless of whether it is their personal choice, and that in their opinion further discussion of the matter during a meeting would not change the majority will.

Although this application of RONR to electronic voting is, in our opinion, legitimate, we recommend, where possible, that the issue be put to a vote of the faculty assembly. This approach enables the faculty to explicitly agree, through their elected representatives, to the use of electronic messaging for both deliberations and voting. Moreover, once electronic voting is so approved, the additional machinations entailed by the last option above will no longer be necessary. We propose said option only to enable committees to vote electronically while modification of the assembly's constitution and/or by-laws is being contemplated.

### **A Protocol for Conducting Formal Electronic Deliberations**

As noted above, communication support systems such as electronic mail and more sophisticated forms of EMS facilitate interactions among members of a group (Pinsonneault & Kraemer, 1990). A properly structured process for deliberations transforms a communication support system into a decision support system that facilitates consensus building while honoring the rights of all members of a group (Donelan, 1993). The rules of parliamentary procedure described in RONR are such a structured process. Therefore, the following protocol is grounded in the principles underlying parliamentary law and committee procedure given in RONR.

Although the procedures in RONR for the conduct of business in large boards are quite lengthy and detailed, procedures governing the conduct of committees and small boards are much less formal and cumbersome, allowing for a virtually seamless adaptation to electronic deliberations. Our protocol provides for: (1) establishing electronic deliberations as the default mechanism for conducting committee work; (2) deliberating under normal circumstances in which there is no imminent deadline; (3) voting electronically; (4) confirming a quorum; (5) expedited deliberations when there is an imminent deadline; (6) calling in-person meetings when necessary; and (7) conducting

hearings in which other members of the academic community are heard by the committee.

The first essential step in using electronic messaging for committee deliberations is to establish it as the default mechanism for conducting work on a particular committee. This is the responsibility of the chair of the committee and falls within the ordinary rights and responsibilities of a chair for determining the manner in which a committee will conduct business. Obviously, if a majority of members of a committee feel strongly that electronic deliberations will not be an appropriate or desirable mechanism for conducting committee business, then the chair would be ill advised to press the point. But we have not encountered such resistance in our community.

At the beginning of any time period in which a committee has been constituted or re-constituted (usually at the beginning of an academic year or semester), the chair should inform all members of a committee in writing and/or at a committee meeting that the committee will be employing electronic deliberations. At the same time, the chair should distribute in writing the protocol to be employed in those deliberations. At a minimum, the protocol should stipulate: (1) the frequency at which members are expected to check in on the electronic deliberations (usually daily); (2) the usual time period for deliberating a given issue; (3) the mechanism for calling and tallying votes electronically; (4) provisions for an expedited deliberation process for use when there is an imminent deadline and an in-person meeting is not feasible; and (5) the mechanism for calling in-person meetings when desirable. As with other committee business, the use of this protocol should be approved either by a majority vote of the members of the committee or by the greater society as dictated by the society by-laws.

We recommend the following guidelines for ordinary electronic deliberations:

- Each member of a committee will be expected to check in on the electronic deliberations at least once per day. If distributed e-mails are being used for this purpose, this will consist simply of logging onto the e-mail system and reading all messages from committee members.
- There will be a seven-day period for deliberations on any given issue. Within that period, all members of a committee may contribute their own opinions on the issue and/or comment on the contributions of others.
- If, at the end of this period, substantive issues appear to remain unresolved, the chair should extend the deliberations at his or her discretion. Any two members of the committee can also call for an extension of the deliberations (one member initiating the call and another seconding it).
- At the end of the deliberation period, the chair will call for a vote on the issue by the members of the committee. As in physical meetings, calling for a vote requires a well-worded motion which committee members may vote for, against, or abstain. When e-mail is used, members will vote by indicating their choice in an e-mail to all members of the committee. There should always be a minimum of 48 hours allowed for voting. This ensures that all members will be able to participate in the voting, even if they check in electronically just once per day and not always at the same time each day.
- If e-mail is used, *all* messages, votes, motions, etc., should be sent to *all members* of the committee.

Allowing seven days for deliberations is desirable since most faculty member schedules cycle on a weekly basis. Provisions to extend the deliberation period should be exercised

freely, since RONR prescribes that 'motions to close or limit debate should generally not be entertained (§48).'

A quorum for both deliberations and voting can be established in a number of ways. The most straightforward method, applicable to all electronic messaging systems, is for members of a committee to respond to all deliberations with a null message if they have nothing to add. Alternatively, many e-mail systems enable the chair to be notified when a message is opened by the recipient(s). With such systems, a quorum can be established according to the number of committee members who have opened the chair's message calling for deliberations on an issue. In the case of voting, however, the quorum should always be established according to the number of committee members casting votes. Members who do not wish to vote 'yes' or 'no' should therefore submit a message with an 'abstain' vote. If too few votes are submitted within the voting period to establish a quorum, the chair should extend the voting period by 24 hours and remind members who have not yet voted that their votes are needed.

Occasionally, time constraints compel a committee to expedite deliberations on an issue. In such circumstances, an in-person meeting may be optimal (see below), but it is often impossible to find a good time for a meeting on short notice. When a committee is unable to meet in person and wishes to expedite electronic deliberations, we recommend the following procedures:

- Each member of a committee should be asked to check in on the electronic deliberations as often as is feasible during the expedited deliberation period.
- The expedited deliberation period should never be less than 48 hours.
- If, at the end of this period, substantive issues appear to remain unresolved, the deliberations can be extended either by the chair or by any two other members of the committee, subject as above to a vote by the committee as a whole to conclude deliberations. In some cases, it will become clear that the issues at hand are too complex or controversial to be resolved in an expedited manner. If so, it will usually be desirable to inform whatever body the committee is reporting to that a rapid recommendation will not be possible.
- To expedite voting, committee members can be invited to declare their votes on an issue in the course of deliberations. They should of course be free to alter their votes if they are convinced to change their minds. Committee members who have no comments to make should at least declare a vote during the deliberation period.

As noted above, RONR defines a meeting as, 'a single official gathering of its members in one room or area to transact business for a length of time during which there is no cessation of proceedings and the members do not separate, unless for a short recess (§8).' Electronic deliberations do not strictly speaking qualify as meetings according to this definition. Arguably, this merely reflects the technological limitations in existence when the definition was established. However, the ninth revised edition of RONR dates from 1991, and teleconferencing has been in existence for some time. Moreover, it could be argued that the simple physical presence of all members of a committee in one room for a period of time permits consensus-building that cannot be achieved in other deliberation formats.

We therefore recommend that electronic deliberations not be considered as equivalent to meetings. However, as also noted above, the purpose of committees is not to meet but to deliberate. RONR stipulates that a meeting can be called either by the chair or by any two members of the committee (§49). In that spirit, we recommend that should a committee choose to use electronic deliberations as the default mechanism for conduct-



ing committee business, it be agreed that an in-person meeting will be scheduled whenever called for by the chair or by any two members of the committee. The most common use of this procedure will be when two or more members of a committee feel that ongoing electronic deliberations are not enabling the committee to achieve consensus.

Once a chair has determined an acceptable time for a meeting, all members of the committee must be notified. If this notification is given electronically, the chair should confirm receipt of this message by requesting a response from each member or by selecting the return notification option for the message that specifies the time and place of the meeting.

A *hearing* is a meeting in which the committee is to make substantive recommendations or decisions on an important matter and gives members of the society an opportunity to appear before it and present their views (§49). Such hearings should not be conducted electronically, lest some interested members of the community be excluded. However, the deliberations of the committee following the hearing may of course be conducted electronically.

A summary of this protocol is presented in Table 1. The protocol outlined above is consistent with RONR, and so should be consistent with the by-laws of societies which conduct business in accordance with RONR. Some by-laws may however include provisions that are inconsistent with the use of electronic messaging for committee deliberations, and RONR prohibits committees from adopting their own rule 'except as authorized in the bylaws or in instructions given to the committee by the society (§49). Before this or similar protocols are employed, a committee chair should therefore ensure that no by-laws will be violated or seek change in bylaws as necessary.

### **Conclusion**

Electronic messaging can be an efficient means to conduct academic committee deliberations. It eliminates scheduling conflicts and the need to keep meeting minutes, and encourages cogent input from all members, especially those who might be otherwise discouraged from providing input. By making more efficient use of committee members' time, it ultimately provides increased opportunities for academics to fulfill their primary responsibilities—teaching and research.

In this paper, we have offered a protocol for electronic deliberations that honors the rights of committee members and is consistent with Robert's Rules of Order. Implementing a formal protocol for electronic deliberations by academic committees ensures that all committee members will have an opportunity to participate fully in the committee's deliberations. In this way, electronic deliberations can provide as much opportunity for achieving a consensus as in-person meetings, while also offering the convenience associated with electronic communication. Should electronic deliberations not appear to be working in a particular situation, this protocol provides a mechanism for calling an in-person meeting, thereby providing the best of both worlds.

In most cases, this protocol should be consistent with the by-laws for college or university governance. A committee chair should not however assume this is the case. If existing by-laws appear to exclude the possibility of electronic deliberations by committees, a motion to amend them should be introduced by the committee chair. To facilitate the use of electronic deliberations, a committee chair may wish to recommend this protocol (or an equivalent) for use by all committees at their institution.

We have developed this protocol to be consistent with RONR because RONR is so

widely used in academic settings. Its use is not, however, universal. As RONR is based on commonly established principles of parliamentary procedure, the protocol presented here should be generally applicable. Academicians working at institutions whose parliamentary activity is not governed by RONR may, however, wish to modify it to ensure compliance with the parliamentary framework of their institution. Such modifications as one may wish to make should nevertheless ensure that electronic deliberations do not (1) unwittingly violate established institutional policies and procedures, or (2) compromise the effectiveness and inclusiveness of committee deliberations.

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## **Appendix—An Electronic Deliberation Protocol (Summary)**

### **1. Establishing the process**

- Notify members in writing or in person that deliberations will be conducted electronically
- Provide members with a copy of the complete electronic deliberation protocol
- Inform committee members that they are expected to check messages daily

### **2. Normal Deliberation Process**

- A deliberation quorum is confirmed by either a receipt notification mechanism or by members responding with at least a null response.
- The nominal deliberation period is one week
- If necessary, deliberations can be extended at the discretion of the chair or on the call of two committee members
- After deliberations are completed, a well-worded motion is put to a vote, allowing 48 hours for voting
- A voting quorum is established through explicit vote casting by committee members
- In-person meetings can be called by the chair or on the call of any two members

### **3. Expedited Deliberation Process**

- The expedited process should be used only when necessary
- The deliberation period should extend at least 48 hours
- Deliberations can be extended at the discretion of the chair or on the call of two committee members
- Votes may be cast during deliberations, but may be changed before the close of deliberations

### **4. Hearings**

- Hearings should not be conducted electronically
- Deliberations following hearing may be conducted electronically