

About Faculty Meeting

Our faculty meetings resemble most others in including the approval of the minutes of previous meetings, business brought to the faculty for discussion and/or action, announcements and reports (though the last two are now mostly distributed in writing for questions at the meeting). These agenda items may come from committees or from people who play particular roles at the college, but any faculty member is free to put something on the agenda that they think the faculty should discuss; the Clerk of the meeting (in consultation with the Faculty Affairs and Planning Committee) determines the order of the agenda. During the meeting, the Clerk calls on faculty and seeks to determine where we are at a given point in discussion; the Secretary takes the minutes.

If a particular item calls for faculty action, or if it calls for the expression of collective opinion or advice, we operate by a **consensus method** derived from the order of business used at their meetings by the Friends or Quakers who founded the college. (See the appendix on this order of business in the Faculty Handbook, Provost's Office website.) It's worth noting, though, that this isn't a custom that goes back to the earliest days of the college, but was introduced in the mid-twentieth century when the faculty became fed up with Robert's Rules of Order. It should also be emphasized that ours is a secularized version of Quaker practice and doesn't rely on any assumption of shared religious views.

Under this method, faculty members discuss a particular issue for an indeterminate length of time, though one sometimes constrained by what else has to be done at the meeting. When there seems to have been a general airing of opinions (and, in a new experiment, after one or more non-binding and anonymous straw polls) the Clerk will try to determine whether or not a consensus has been reached. Consensus doesn't necessarily mean that everyone agrees completely with the proposal before us, but it should mean that virtually everyone has arrived at a point where they are willing to go with the proposal. If the Clerk thinks that consensus has occurred, the Clerk will ask the faculty if we are in agreement and will wait to see if there is a general murmuring of yes and nodding of heads. If at this point anyone still feels strongly opposed to the proposal OR feels that a consensus has not in fact been reached, they should speak out. (Faculty members can also speak out if they feel that the Clerk has mistakenly or prematurely abandoned the possibility of consensus.)

If there is no consensus, there are several possibilities. We can continue the discussion, and see if consensus emerges. The Clerk can determine that no consensus is possible at the present time, in which case we will often want to return to this item of business later, perhaps with interim discussions outside the meeting. Or – if there seem to be very few people who have insuperable objections – the Clerk can ask these faculty members if they are willing to stand outside consensus, which means that consensus will go ahead but that a few people will be recorded as standing outside it. Whether the objections of a few faculty members will prevent consensus depends both on the willingness of these faculty members to let consensus go ahead without them and on the judgment of other faculty as to the weightiness of the objections and of those making them.

To assist the consensus process:

The Clerk should make every effort to clarify the reasons for believing that we have or haven't arrived at a consensus and to make the process as transparent as possible.

At the same time, faculty members who not only expressed at the outset but also continue to have serious objections to a proposal should make an effort to reiterate their views as discussion is being concluded, so that the Clerk is aware that an objection expressed earlier is still strongly felt. The Clerk, in turn, should make an effort to ascertain the current views of those who earlier raised strong objections.

Faculty who want to express agreement with what someone has just said, but don't want to speak out themselves, can say "I agree" or something along those lines.

Straw polls (taken with the use of clickers) afford another opportunity for faculty who have not spoken to register their views.

Faculty who speak often and/or at great length should make an effort to leave room for others, and can also ask those who are silent to speak out. (The Clerk may urge contributions from people – e.g. junior faculty – who as a group have been under-represented in a particular discussion or who offer a particular perspective.)

Finally, while feeling completely free to disagree as vociferously as we like with any opinion expressed, we might remember this desideratum (from the Pendle Hill Pamphlet on consensus): every speaker credits every other sincere speaker with at least some insight.

There have been some obvious **drawbacks to the consensus method**, as traditionally practiced at Haverford.

Consensus is undeniably a slower method than voting; it is generally the case that business has to be brought to the faculty at two separate meetings before we come to a consensus, though when the process is working well that often means that the issues have been more fully aired and sometimes that we have arrived at a better version of the proposal.

Another drawback to this method in the past has been that those who objected, but for some reason didn't feel comfortable speaking out, had no way of registering their objection (as they would, at least in numerical terms, if we voted.) This has to some extent been remedied by the use of straw polls.

Finally, some feel that as the faculty has grown in size the method has worked less well, so that it has become less clear what constitutes a consensus or whether it has been reached.

Changes

Increased concerns about the functioning of the faculty meeting in general and of consensus in particular have led to a number of changes over the past few years, some of them incremental modifications or refinements, others more radical alterations or additions. These changes have five main goals: (1) to give us more time for discussion of at the faculty meeting; (2) to allow for a more informed discussion; (3) to give priority, where possible, to the most important business; (4) to ensure broader representation of opinion; and (5) to increase confidence in the consensus process. Those marked by an asterisk were brought to the faculty in the spring of 2012 by the Faculty Affairs and Planning Committee (FAPC) in collaboration with the Clerk and were approved by the faculty as part of a two-year experiment; they were reconsidered in April 2014 and approved for another two years, with one addition, marked below by two asterisks.

The formation of the agenda:

(1) The agenda and all necessary documents should reach the faculty if possible by the Monday before the meeting and at latest by Tuesday morning before the meeting, so that people will have time to think through and discuss the issues and to read accompanying materials. NB: This means that faculty *must* respond promptly to the call for agenda items that comes from the Provost's office, and get items and materials in by the specified deadline, normally the Friday of the week before the meeting at 10:00 AM. (Because the Clerk and the chair of FAPC must confer on the agenda and its order, there is necessarily some time lag between the handing in of agenda items and the sending out of the agenda.)

(2) It should be a presumption that important proposals are normally brought to the faculty twice, first for discussion and then for a decision.

(3) Committees and individuals should where possible avoid bringing the faculty business that must for some external reason be decided immediately; such a situation often puts undue pressure on the faculty to accede to the proposal.

* (4) All announcements and reports (as opposed to items for faculty discussion or action) must be circulated in writing prior to Faculty Meeting; these will not appear as separate agenda items, but questions concerning them may be raised during the open period (see next item).

* (5) There will be an open period of 10-15 minutes at the end of every Faculty Meeting, for the purpose of raising (a) questions about the previously distributed announcements and reports, and (b) any issues that do not appear on the official agenda.

(6) Anyone who submits an agenda item to the Provost's office should at the same time email the Clerk with information about what they plan to present and how long their presentation is likely to take.

(7) On the basis of this information, the Clerk will provide a note on the agenda, giving a fuller description of particular items and a reminder of where we are in any ongoing discussion. The faculty will thus be informed not only (for example) that the Educational Policy Committee is bringing an item, but also that this item concerns a proposal about grading that was previously brought before the faculty for discussion and now returns for action.

*(8) The order of the agenda will be established by the Clerk in consultation with FAPC, with the Clerk having final say; as a general rule, the order will be (a) items for action, with precedence given to major standing committees; (b) items for discussion; (c) open period for raising questions about distributed announcements and reports and issues not on the agenda.

*(9) The reports of the President and Provost will appear in the agenda as needed and where appropriate. (That is, the President, for example, might in a given month simply submit a written report for questions in the open period or might request an early spot on the agenda for an important announcement and to seek faculty response.)

(10) The President's and Provost's reports should follow these guidelines: (a) They should normally be under ten minutes each; if a longer report is called for, they should inform the Clerk. (b) When there is substantial information to be shared, it should, where appropriate, be circulated to the faculty in advance, with questions taken at the meeting. (c) If the President or the Provost plans to refer to or incorporate a report by some other member of the staff, faculty, or administration, this should normally be a separate agenda item. (It may still be introduced by the President or Provost, but won't be part of their initial reports.) Most such reports (see 4 above) should in any case be submitted in written form for questions at the end of the meeting, unless there is a strong reason for their taking the form of a presentation.

The consensus process:

*(11) The consensus process now includes the use of non-binding straw votes, to be registered (anonymously) by the use of clickers. Where an item calls for faculty discussion at one meeting to be followed by faculty action at another, any faculty member can call for a straw vote (by clickers), and the Clerk will in any case do so before concluding discussion. After the preliminary discussion, the results of the straw vote or votes will be noted by the Clerk and recorded in the minutes as a partial indicator of where the Faculty stands at that point. When an item returns for faculty action, further straw votes will be used to ensure that everyone's view has been expressed in some form, providing a measurement of faculty sentiment both of those who have spoken to an issue at hand and of those who have remained silent.

All faculty are welcome to attend and participate in discussion at Faculty Meeting; all those who (according to the Faculty Handbook's definition of the faculty) may vote in elections may also take part in straw poll. These are: the President and Provost of the

college; all tenure-line and continuing appointment faculty, even if on leave; temporary full-time faculty appointed for more than one year or subsequently renewed.

This new procedure has necessarily involved a fair amount of trial and error, but we took the following as starting points:

- A straw vote will normally not be taken before (at a minimum) ten minutes of discussion. The exceptions would be instances in which there are no more questions or comments and we seem to be moving rapidly to consensus.
- If a straw vote reveals that very few people favor the proposal, then there will be a presumption that the proposal (if it has any future) needs further work and/or further discussion, possibly in other venues as well as in later faculty meetings.
- If a straw vote reveals that the faculty is significantly divided, then it points to the need for further discussion. Depending on what has emerged during the discussion, this may mean an immediate continuation of discussion, a postponement of discussion, or further work on the proposal by the presenter. In the case of continuing discussion, it may be appropriate (after further discussion) to take a second straw vote, in which the question is not “who favors the proposal” but “who is at this point willing to proceed with the proposal.”
- If a straw vote reveals that very few people are opposed, then those who are opposed will have an opportunity further to articulate their opposition, but the clerk may ultimately ask if those who have expressed opposition are willing to stand outside the consensus. According to the practice we have been following, a faculty member who has expressed dissent in a straw poll may either declare a wish to stand outside consensus, or remain silent, thus standing outside consensus in effect.

** The faculty meeting minutes should include a highlighted section urging those who have dissented to give feedback to the reporting committee.

As a result of our experience at the first few meetings (and of feedback on that experience) we began using a greater variety of polls:

Two alternatives (to be used as a rule in the final or concluding stages of discussion when we're on the verge of action):

- (1A) I am willing to proceed with the proposal
- (2B) I am not willing to proceed with the proposal

Three alternatives (to be used as a rule at early stages, in the course of or after a preliminary discussion):

- (1A) I favor the proposal

- (2B) I don't favor the proposal
- (3C) I am undecided/too soon to say

Four alternatives (can be used in place of (2) where appropriate and helpful to the presenter)

- (1A) I favor the proposal as it stands
- (2A) I favor the proposal with minor changes
- (3A) I don't favor the proposal
- (4A) I am undecided/too soon to say

Miscellaneous:

(12) There will be an extra faculty meeting in late September or early October, to avoid the long gap between the first and the second meetings and to add more time for substantive discussion of issues that arise or come back in the fall.

(13) The first time a faculty member speaks at a given meeting, they should offer a brief introduction, e.g. "Vernon Whitford, Classics".

(14) *Meetings will start at 4:15 sharp.* We've been losing 5-10 minutes of our much-needed time.

(15) Refreshments will be available at 4:00 before all faculty meetings (except in instances where there is a reception after the meeting).

A final comment: faculty should try to come regularly to faculty meetings. There is in our order of doing business no such thing as a quorum, but the Faculty Handbook notes the importance of faculty attendance "so that meaningful consensus can be reached".

Israel Burshatin
Clerk of the Faculty