Policy on Decision Making in FES

Approved February 10, 2014

Votes: 24 yes; 1 no; 0 abstain (one by absentee ballot)

Background

Need and Scope. To function effectively a group needs to understand how decisions are made as well as when they are reached. Moreover, the credibility of the decision process is enhanced when decisions are made in a predictable and consistent way (in contrast to a set of processes that evolves from decision to decision and could be manipulated to produce an outcome). This document outlines a set of decision making guidelines, best practices, and policies on how votes are to be taken in the Forest Ecosystems and Society (FES) Department. Decision making is one part of a department's governance; others aspects of governance such as the number and type of standing committees are addressed elsewhere.

Goal. The goal of this policy is to create a process for making major decisions that that is predictable, consistent, and productive, not unwieldy.   Decisions of smaller importance, such as gaining a sense of support or agreeing to committee charges, meeting adjournment etc., will be handled in an abbreviated system. However, this policy should be applied to any decision that commits a large share of departmental members to an action of consequence (i.e., a major decision).

Nature of Decisions and Votes

Who Can Vote. Members of FES may influence a decision in two ways: 1) they may provide information, raise concerns, propose solutions, etc related to the decision; and 2) they may vote. All members of the department should participate in the first way. To be able to vote on a major decision the departmental member must meet these eligibility criteria:

1) Voting must be consistent with University and College rules (e.g., Promotion and Tenure)
2) The potential voter must be, in some way, responsible for implementing the outcome of the vote, and
3) The voter must be affected by the outcome of the vote (i.e., have a stake in the outcome).

These eligibility criteria are to be viewed as hierarchical with criterion 1 taking precedence over criterion 2 etc. For example, students may be affected by the outcome of a decision (e.g., grading or admissions), but would not be responsible for implementing the decision. In this case students would not be eligible to vote on decisions involving grading or admission. Based on these guidelines, the department will develop a list of eligible voters for all common types of decisions (e.g., general departmental governance, graduate and undergraduate curriculum, promotion and tenure policy).

The Voting Process. Potentially there are several methods by which votes could be taken. While there are merits to always voting online, such as increasing participation, there are also legitimate concerns about the complexity of online voting, disconnections between discussions and decisions, as well as the potential to weaken departmental cohesion if online voting is the only mechanism for reaching major decisions. Requiring voters to be physically present is simple to implement but it precludes potential voters that might be unable to attend a Departmental meeting due to a class, essential travel or other long-standing commitments. Scheduling votes in advance would allow potential voters the possibility of rearranging schedules so as to physically participate; however, requiring voters to be physically present will inevitably lead to informed, interested voters not participating in major decisions; this could also degrade departmental cohesion. A key factor in making sound decisions is for voters to be involved and informed: to vote one must be actively engaged in the decision making process and one way this is engagement is achieved is to be part of the discussion leading up to the vote. Given these considerations the following policy regarding voting is proposed:

 For decisions of lesser importance, online surveys, ballots, and other mechanisms can be employed. For a decision of major consequence (i.e., requires a major action and affects a large portion of the department), votes should be taken in a Departmental meeting. However, one need not be physically present to be actively involved in discussions or to make an informed decision. *Therefore those department members eligible to vote on an issue will be allowed to cast a vote if they are either physically present, participate in the discussion remotely (e.g., via telephone), or have arranged for an absentee ballot before the vote.*

Although this policy allows potential voters to participate in ways other than to be physically present, it is preferred that voters attend the decision meeting. Absentee ballots may be necessary from time to time, but it should be the voters choice of last resort and not routine.

To implement this policy a standardized conference call number will be set-up so that those who need to call in can participate. Other methods may also be employed (e.g.,polycom), but voters should always be able to count on being able to call in. Those participating remotely should contact the relevant committee chair to assure inclusion in the discussions and vote. To apply for absentee ballots, the potential voter should apply well in advance of the vote by sending the relevant committee chair and departmental head an email describing the nature of the scheduling conflict and a statement assuring that their decision will be an informed one. Absentee ballots will be accepted within a two day period preceding the departmental meeting in which the vote is taken; this will allow all voters to participate in discussions prior to the vote and to be influenced by the most current arguments and evidence. In addition to providing the actual vote, the absentee voter should provide insights into the factors they considered; the latter information will be shared with those participating at the meeting or remotely present during the discussion leading up to the vote.

Recommended Steps in Decision Making Process

The following steps should be followed to the degree possible whenever a major decision is to be made by the department. *These should be viewed as best practices* that if implemented will make the processes involved in major decisions predictable, consistent, and productive. It is recognized that in some cases, decisions need to be made rapidly and there may not be sufficient time to follow all these steps (particularly time for extensive research and discussion). However, when time allows the following recommended steps should be followed.

Identify questions/issues/policies/strategies/opportunities/actions in need of major department level decision. This comes at any time on any topic. From this point forward, the process is coordinated by the Department Head, but all members of the department, FES faculty and committees are expected to help identify items needing major decisions. Decision making should be viewed as a continuous process of improvement and not a one-time process.

Select major decision(s) to be worked. The Department Head, with recommendations of the faculty, staff or students as appropriate will decide the number of active decisions and timing of these decisions. Not all decisions identified in the initial step need be considered "major" decisions; alternative decision

making processes may be used if they are deemed appropriate by the Department Head, with recommendation from the faculty, staff, or students that are affected by the decision.

Set decision space, charge for committee, and appointing a committee chair. To focus the topic of decision, the nature of the decision space (i.e., what is to be considered versus not considered) shall be defined clearly. Likewise the charge to the committee of faculty, staff or students working on draft proposals, informational gathering, etc should be defined clearly before work begins. The type of vote (e.g., advisory versus binding), who can vote, and what constitutes a "legal" vote: simple majority, general consensus, unanimous consensus should be determined at this time as well. Each committee working on a decision will have a chair appointed by the time the committee begins its work.

Complete committee tasks. The committee, depending on its charge, could gather information to inform decisions, draft a policy, identify possible strategies, or conduct some combination activities.

Share information and conduct structured discussion(s). As tasks become completed by the committee, they should be shared with other members of the department involved in the decision-making process. Draft policies, strategies, information gathered are to be shared within the department via email, departmental websites, and meetings. The committee will verbally share findings, proposals, seeks feedback, provides clarifications, and accept alternative ideas to be explored during meetings and other venues. The discussion process should be guided by a set of best practices such as respectful dialog, appropriate venue, focus on issue at hand, involving vested parties, etc. For example, to the extent possible, discussions should not be conducted via email unless such comments are specifically solicited in this form by the relevant committee.

Set meeting for decision. Votes will be scheduled long enough before the decision meeting for the faculty, staff, and/or students to think about their view, exchange informally with others, and to arrange schedules so that they can attend the meeting that the vote will be held. Ideally the vote will be scheduled one month in advance, but this depends on the how pressing the need for a decision happens to be. Votes will be scheduled not less than two weeks in advance of the announcement unless circumstances absolutely prohibit it.   Those needing to participate remotely or planning to vote absentee should contact the relevant committee chair and the department head well in advance of the decision meeting.

Discuss decision. At the meeting in which the vote is taken there will be a discussion of the decision. This would precede any vote and allow time for clarifications, concerns, modifications, amendments, etc. When the departmental members voting on a decision feel they are ready to vote, an abbreviated quick pro forma checklist of clarifications, concerns, modifications, amendments, etc. shall be reviewed by the presiding meeting executive before proceeding to the actual vote.

Vote. The vote will be taken in a manner consistent with the nature of the decision, those eligible to vote, and what constitutes a "legal" vote for this particular decision: simple majority, general consensus, unanimous consensus. There are three possible ways to vote and the tally will be recorded: yes, no, or abstain. In addition the manner in which votes are received (physically present, remotely, absentee) will be recorded. If there are objections to the outcome of the vote, they will be noted.

Announce decision, new policy, or strategy. To be effective decisions will be announced either via email or posting on the Department website. Announcing at the time of the vote is not sufficient to inform the entire department, but is encouraged if the vote tally is available. In addition the specific wording of the decision should be included so that what was decided and not just how it was decided is available to members of the Department.

Archive. A permanent and readily available record of each decision, new policy, strategy, etc., will be created and maintained. In addition there will be archived minutes of all the proceedings leading up to a decision. These need not be detailed but should allow one to understand the how decisions were reached and the factors that went into making the decision. Objections to the policy by those disagreeing with the outcome will also be archived.