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No Pets on Zoom

Learning to apply parliamentary procedure in virtual meetings

Last fall, as we acclimated to remote work for the foreseeable future, the University at Albany Libraries faculty had an important matter to settle. A lively discussion ensued over Zoom as we took turns raising virtual hands.

“Speaking in favor of the motion, I often notice cats goofing around in the background of people’s Zoom videos, and it makes it very hard to concentrate.”

“I oppose the motion; I find that cats are calming, and they make meetings more pleasant.”

“I also think we should require everyone to mute their microphones.”

“Point of Order! The previous comment doesn’t pertain to the current discussion.”

“Point well taken. The discussion should only pertain to the motion on the floor. Is there any further discussion on the motion to not allow cats at Zoom meetings?”

In spring 2020, along with the majority of institutions across the country, the University at Albany (UAlbany) was forced to quickly adapt to remote work in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.¹ In addition to ramping up our virtual reference services and implementing curbside pickup, the UAlbany Libraries had to make adjustments to our day-to-day

operations, including faculty meetings. As part of its health and safety guidelines, the university advised that staff and faculty hold meetings virtually using the extensive range of available collaboration tools (e.g., Zoom).²

The University Libraries’ Professional Activities Committee (PAC), which implements profession-

al interest and continuing education programs for the library faculty, had previously added parliamentary procedure to the lineup of professional development workshops. We planned to introduce *Robert’s Rules of Order*,³ the governing guidelines for our faculty meetings, to junior faculty members and refresh senior faculty members more familiar with it. The workshop was continually bumped down the list for other programs, but its relevance became especially apparent as the library faculty

adjusted to the particular challenges of remote meetings. We decided to revisit the idea with a focus on virtual meetings and came up with an entertaining scenario: “No Pets on Zoom.”



L. Puzier, 2020, No Pets on Zoom: Parliamentary Procedure Program marketing image [digital image]. UAlbany Libraries.

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Planning the workshop

[Henry Martyn Robert] published his first book in 1876, and it was about 180 pages. . . . Since that time . . . it's the 12th edition, and this book is a little bit more than 700 pages. So, it's gone from about 180 to 700 pages. Now the purpose of Robert's Rules is to help organizations get things done in an orderly fashion.—UAlbany Senate Parliamentarian Ronald Vero.⁴

The UAlbany library faculty refer to the latest edition of Robert's Rules of Order for their meeting procedures.⁵ Shortly after the pandemic shutdown necessitated a nationwide shift to remote work, the Robert's Rules Association published a set of sample rules for hosting electronic meetings in *Robert's Rules of Order Newly Revised, 12th Edition*.⁶ This new information increased the potential value of a workshop to all faculty members who needed to know how to apply the rules when participating in meetings on a virtual platform, in this case, Zoom.

In preparation for the workshop, the three members of PAC reviewed our faculty bylaws, researched parliamentary procedure, and made sure the library purchased the latest edition of Robert's Rules of Order for the collection.

We also reached out to the UAlbany Senate Parliamentarian Ronald Vero to see if he would be interested in participating in the workshop. Ultimately, the committee members met with Vero several times over the next month to learn about the rules' most common applications and the brand new guidelines for electronic meetings. Vero's knowledge as a parliamentarian was indispensable as the team developed an interactive workshop that would keep staff engaged and allow them to practice applying the rules firsthand.

In November 2020, staff were invited to a mock library faculty meeting in which the group role-played the chair, parliamentarian, and faculty body. PAC

marketed the event as a useful workshop for anyone interested in learning about *Robert's Rules of Order* or understanding how parliamentary procedure helps meetings run smoothly.

Running the workshop

The "No Pets on Zoom" parliamentary procedure program focused on how motions are raised, amended, and voted on during faculty meetings, which can be a mysterious process for those unfamiliar with Robert's Rules of Order.

For the first part of the workshop, Vero led attendees in a brief and engaging overview of the history of Robert's rules. Yes, Henry Martyn Robert was a real fellow. After an embarrassing experience trying to run a local meeting without guidance, Robert started to research legislative assemblies' rules. He would carry note cards to meetings with some rules written down to guide him but continued to find the rules inadequate.⁷ Robert traveled across the United States as a military member and found no universally accepted rules for running meetings. To help folks manage orderly meetings, he wrote the first edition of rules, *Pocket Manual of*

Rules of Order for Deliberative Assemblies, in 1876.⁸

Vero also reviewed the most common uses of the rules in meetings, such as motions, amendments, and discussions. He stressed, however, that "Robert's Rules of Order supplement the procedures outlined in the faculty bylaws. In the event of disagreements between the two documents, the bylaws have supremacy."⁹ This was an important reminder for all faculty to review the bylaws in addition to having Robert's Rules cheat-sheets handy.

For the second part of the workshop, the mock faculty meeting, the PAC members developed an easy-to-follow script with two interactive scenarios.¹⁰ We enlisted some volunteers to play the scripted roles, but also left room for open discussion and practice. In the first scenario, a graduate research award was proposed. This scenario demonstrated the raising of a simple motion, which someone then seconded (af-



Henry Martyn Robert [digital image]. (n.d.). Public Domain, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=190990>.

firming their interest in it and moving the motion forward). Next, the motion was stated (motion on the floor), followed by a group discussion and group vote. Finally, the chair announced the results of the vote. This practice scenario helped attendees see a meeting's rhythm as the chair directed communication, questions, and comments, and Vero, as parliamentarian, answered questions in real-time.

The role-playing exercise also gave everyone the chance to practice using Zoom's nonverbal feedback and meeting reactions features, as we would in a real faculty meeting. Once enabled by the host, these buttons allow attendees in virtual meetings to participate without unmuting their microphones.¹¹ When a member needed the attention of the chair, they used the raise-hand feature and waited to be acknowledged. When it was time to vote, attendees were asked to use the Yes or No buttons to vote for or against the motion.

The headlining motion, which proposed that cats not be allowed at Zoom meetings, was next. This scenario was designed to open the discussion and encourage attendees to engage and participate in the procedure. While the introduction and first scenario were recorded for later viewing, PAC did not record this part of the workshop to make everyone feel more comfortable participating. In this scenario, the motion was raised to ban cats from Zoom meetings. Another attendee quickly seconded the motion. The chair asked the first attendee if they would like to speak their motion. "I would like to propose this motion because cats have been stepping all over people's keyboards and typing into the chat, and it's very distracting during meetings." Someone proposed an amendment to ban all pets on Zoom, leading to a fun and energetic discussion. After the debate, a point of order was called, the group held a vote on the amendment, and then a final vote was

taken on the amended motion. Ultimately, the nays had it, and the faculty voted to permit all pets at Zoom meetings (much to the delight of one author's cat who made a timely cameo at the end of the meeting).

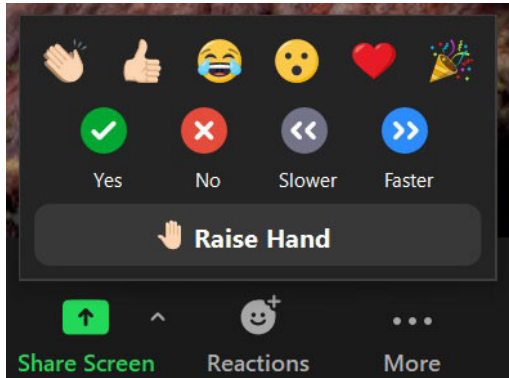
Outcomes

"No Pets on Zoom" was one of the most well-attended professional development workshops hosted by PAC. The workshop was voluntary and of the 66 library faculty members, 27 attended the live program and 13 viewed the recording. Attendees provided feedback via the post-event survey, noting, "It was helpful to have two role-playing scenarios in order to repeat rules and basic meeting flow" and that it was an "informative, fun, interactive experience completely through Zoom." Our faculty chair, who agreed to role-play as the chair during the session, also noted the value he found in the program:

The workshop was really helpful for me to understand how to properly run our faculty meetings. It's healthy for us to disagree, and while Robert's Rules can feel odd or overly formal at times, it's really important to have a standard process to govern discussion to help make these exchanges more productive and less harmful. The workshop also spurred a necessary conversation about the purpose of our faculty meetings and what we as a faculty want to get out of them.¹²

A library faculty member who regularly serves as parliamentarian for faculty meetings also shared positive feedback:

The invitation to "No pets on Zoom" must have intrigued colleagues because the event was well attended and pretty interactive. The program was held well into the 2020 COVID epidemic, when conducting our faculty business via Zoom had lost its luster. So, it's ironic that the planning committee successfully delivered a program about



Nonverbal feedback and meeting reactions on Zoom toolbar. (2021). Screenshot by author.

a dry topic via Zoom by couching it in a stimulating debate about Zoom!¹³

PAC followed up after the workshop by sharing some helpful resources on parliamentary procedure along with the Zoom recording for anyone who missed the event or wanted a refresher.¹⁴ The resources were posted on the libraries' internal website and have had 136 views to date. Most popular is the Robert's Rules Cheat Sheet, a useful document to have on hand when attending a faculty or a senate meeting.

PAC will likely offer some version of this workshop again as a periodical refresher for our library faculty. In the next iteration, we may hold a live mock faculty meeting rather than meeting on Zoom. One benefit of our online workshops, however, is that the recordings will serve as useful resources for anyone who would like a review.

Conclusion

Hosting an introductory workshop like "No Pets on Zoom" is incredibly helpful for faculty members of all ranks who participate in parliamentary procedure or who would like to learn about a well-established method for bringing more order to meetings, whether virtual or in person. While parliamentary procedure may be intimidating to those who are unfamiliar with the etiquette, a primary goal of Robert's Rules is to give everyone in an organization an equal chance to have their ideas and opinions heard.

The lessons from this workshop apply to virtual meetings held during the pandemic and beyond. As local pandemic restrictions lift and institutions move toward a return to the office, we may see hybrid meetings with some in-person and remote attendees. Participants can bring the rules and tools from the workshop to use at virtual, hybrid, and entirely in-person meetings as institutions gradually adjust to a flexible post-pandemic workplace.

For those who are interested in offering a similar workshop, we recommend connecting with your organization's parliamentarian or a local parliamentarian who can share their expertise with you or participate in a workshop with your members. In order to create a friendly practice space that invites participation, try to brainstorm fun and punchy topics for debate. Plan to have at least two items for discussion so that your members can practice different scenarios and share information for folks to have at hand after the work-

shop so that they may refer back to it when needed. Creating an engaging and interactive workshop on parliamentary procedure is possible (and without breakout rooms).

Notes

1. Pradeep Sahu, "Closure of Universities due to Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19): Impact on Education and Mental Health of Students and Academic Staff," *Curēus* 12, no. 4 (2020): e7541, <https://dx.doi.org/10.7759%2Fcurēus.7541>.

2. "Guide for Returning to the Workplace," University at Albany, 7, updated June 11, 2020, <https://perma.cc/S6BQ-TFAG>.

3. Henry M. Robert III, Daniel H. Honemann, Thomas J. Balch, Daniel E. Seabold, and Shmuel Gerber, *Robert's Rules of Order Newly Revised, 12th edition* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2020).

4. Vero, Ronald. "No Pets on Zoom: Parliamentary Procedure Program" (online workshop, University at Albany Libraries, Albany, NY, November 14, 2020).

5. University at Albany Libraries, "University Libraries Faculty By-laws," in *Library Faculty Handbook* (amended 2017), Section 1.2

6. "Sample Rules for Electronic Meetings," Robert's Rules of Order, June 22, 2020, <https://perma.cc/JHN9-TE5F>.

7. Rita Cook, *The Complete Guide to Robert's Rules of Order Made Easy* (Ocala: Atlantic Publishing Group, 2008), 18.

8. "Our History: A Short Look at our Past and our Future," Robert's Rules of Order, 2021, <https://perma.cc/RBB7-TFTJ>.

9. Tyler Norton, "No Pets on Zoom: Library Faculty Participates in Robert's Rules Workshop," *Library News*, University at Albany Libraries, 2020, <https://library.albany.edu/news/fall-2020-no-pets-on-zoom-workshop>.

10. See Robert's Rules Demonstration script, <https://tinyurl.com/pa2an4wj>.

11. "Non-Verbal Feedback and Reactions," Zoom Help Center, January 28, 2021, <https://perma.cc/D9B8-SE2H>.

12. Greg Wiedeman, Chair of Library Faculty, email message to Lauren Puzier, March 5, 2021.

13. Karina Ricker, Library Parliamentarian, email message to Lauren Puzier, March 11, 2021.

14. See Parliamentary Procedure Resources, <https://tinyurl.com/vk6jmstb>. 