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Electronic Balloting and Use of SurveyMonkey for Faculty Input and Shared Governance Decisions

In a university the size of UC, it's sometimes difficult to find a way for faculty members give informal feedback and participate formally in shared governance decisions. Everyone's schedules are full, and face-to-face meetings in large departments and colleges are sometimes difficult to schedule at a time when most or all faculty members can attend. The attraction of using electronic balloting to provide an outlet for feedback or even formal shared governance decision-making is thus understandable.

We've received many questions about electronic balloting, and more specifically the use of SurveyMonkey as a balloting tool, over the past few years. I'd like to answer some of those frequently asked questions, and provide some cautions based on observations on its use across different settings.

SurveyMonkey is certainly convenient in that it's free for situations in which you will only ever collect a maximum of 100 responses per survey, with a maximum of 10 questions. Membership beyond that is still quite cheap: \$20 a month for up to 1,000 survey responses per month, or \$200 a year for unlimited use. (Go to http://www.surveymonkey.com/Home_Pricing.aspx for more details.)

While SurveyMonkey is relatively easy to use, it's *not* uncomplicated. Preparing the questions is the first step, obviously, and survey design matters. It is crucial that someone with at least a basic survey design background or experience be involved in preparing questions for electronic balloting. Wording that at first glance seems obvious can turn out to be confusing in practice. Multiple, embedded questions can quickly become illogical if all of the possible outcomes are not considered.

At minimum, having someone completely outside the situation (e.g., a colleague from a different department or college) read the survey before you release it is very important: a true "outsider" is often able to spot questions that are not clearly worded more quickly than someone who's close to the issue.

Beyond the questions themselves, there are quite a number of survey design decisions that must be made when you set up a survey in SurveyMonkey.

I strongly urge that any faculty member who anticipates being asked to take on this responsibility take a class on Survey Monkey. Because we've received numerous questions about how SurveyMonkey can be used, I've answered some basic questions below and given a check list for setting up an anonymous survey—but this is mostly to give an idea of the kinds of questions that have to be dealt with. It's no substitute for a hands-on class.

Frequently Asked Questions

(1) Is it permissible to use electronic balloting to gather faculty feedback or make shared governance decisions? If yes, for what types of issues?

Your college or department bylaws should define whether or not electronic balloting is permissible. Some bylaws are silent on this issue; some explicitly forbid electronic balloting.

There is a sound rationale for the tradition of forbidding electronic balloting: many complex issues do require a face-to-face meeting where a genuine debate can be had. In reviewing bylaws, I recommend that faculty members consider revisions that make it clear not only whether or not electronic balloting is allowed, but under what conditions and for what types of issues.

It is my belief that electronic balloting serves best as the *end point* of data gathering and discussions that happen in a more traditional fashion. I do not believe email is a good communication tool for any topic that will, in the end, require a vote.

One last note: the University Faculty Senate has its own rules about this matter, and nothing in this article should be inferred to apply to the Faculty Senate.

(2) Can SurveyMonkey be set up for anonymous “balloting”?

SurveyMonkey was designed to do surveys, not balloting. It can be used for balloting—but it’s important to remember that it’s not third-party monitored. Whoever you select to set up and run the survey *could* look at how each person voted, although it would take some work. Faculty members must trust the person running the survey to set it up correctly, keep it anonymous, and accurately report the results.

Having a survey committee doesn’t remove this issue: any one person who has the password to the survey could, in theory, alter certain aspects of the results.

(3) Is SurveyMonkey “secure”? That is, can it be set up to restrict access to the survey and prevent a person from voting more than once?

SurveyMonkey can be set up to only allow access to a specific set of email addresses, and to allow each email address to access the survey just once.

This is not as high a level of security as providing each person with a unique password. Still, it would be extremely difficult for someone to alter results or gain access to the survey from the outside. However, as noted above, since the process of entering email addresses is controlled by the person running the survey, faculty members must trust the person setting up the ballot to enter only the approved email addresses.

(4) When is SurveyMonkey just simply not appropriate?

The more controversial the topic and/or the more serious the implications of the outcome, the more strongly I recommend the use of an outside third party to perform electronic balloting (i.e., UCIT or an outside balloting service) or else balloting the old-fashioned way —paper and a secured ballot box.

Electronic balloting is convenient and I believe its use should be expanded so that faculty members can more easily participate in shared governance, especially in large departments and colleges. Its use, however, cannot in practice undermine the very reason why faculty members are voting in the first place: to have their voices heard.

Faculty members must feel confident that results are transparent and can be verified. It is true that the costs involved in utilizing third-party, secured balloting are not inconsequential to departments or colleges. I believe these costs must be seen as an investment in shared governance—which means an investment in the best practices and decision-making processes that will lead to a stronger UC. I will be asking the Associates Council to consider exploring these issues when it takes up its bargaining preparation work this fall.

Deborah Herman, PhD
Executive Director, AAUP-UC Chapter

Basic Steps for Setting Up SurveyMonkey for Restricted, Anonymous Results

Create Survey

Create new survey from scratch
Enter title
Click on "Create Survey"

Edit Survey

Click on "Add Question Here"
Choose question type [e.g., multiple choice, matrix
of choices, demographic]
Pick a display format
Enter question text
Enter answer choices
Click on "Save Changes"
[Repeat until all questions are added]
Click on "Preview Survey" [If OK, go to next section]

Collect Responses

Click on "Upload your own emails and have
us send invitation"
Enter a name for the link
Click on "Next Step"
Click on "Add recipients to list"
Select on "Add recipients manually" and click on
"I agree to terms of use" [Paste emails into the
box. You can copy and paste them from a list
produced in Excel or in Word. Emails must be
separated by a paragraph marker, i.e., each
email must appear on a separate line.]
Click on "Add recipients"

Change Settings

Look to make sure that "Allow Multiple
Responses?" says "No"
At the bottom of the screen, click "No" for
"Save email address in results?"
[This makes the results anonymous.]
Click on "Save Settings"

Change Restrictions

Click on the box to set a cutoff date and time
[Note that SurveyMonkey is on Pacific Time!]
Click on "Save Restrictions"

Edit Messages

Click on "Create New Message"
Choose persons to receive this message
Click on "Save Selection & Continue"
Enter a subject line and the body of the email
Be careful to retain [SurveyLink]. SurveyMonkey
will automatically enter the link to the survey.
Click on "Save and Preview"
If preview is OK, click "Schedule Delivery." (Note
that SurveyMonkey operates on Pacific Time.)
Click "Send Message"