THE CHRONICLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION

How to Run a Good Meeting

You've been in your share of awful ones. Here's how to make them better.

ILLUSTRATIONS BY JASON HOFFMAN FOR THE CHRONICLE

ADVICE

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Five key questions:

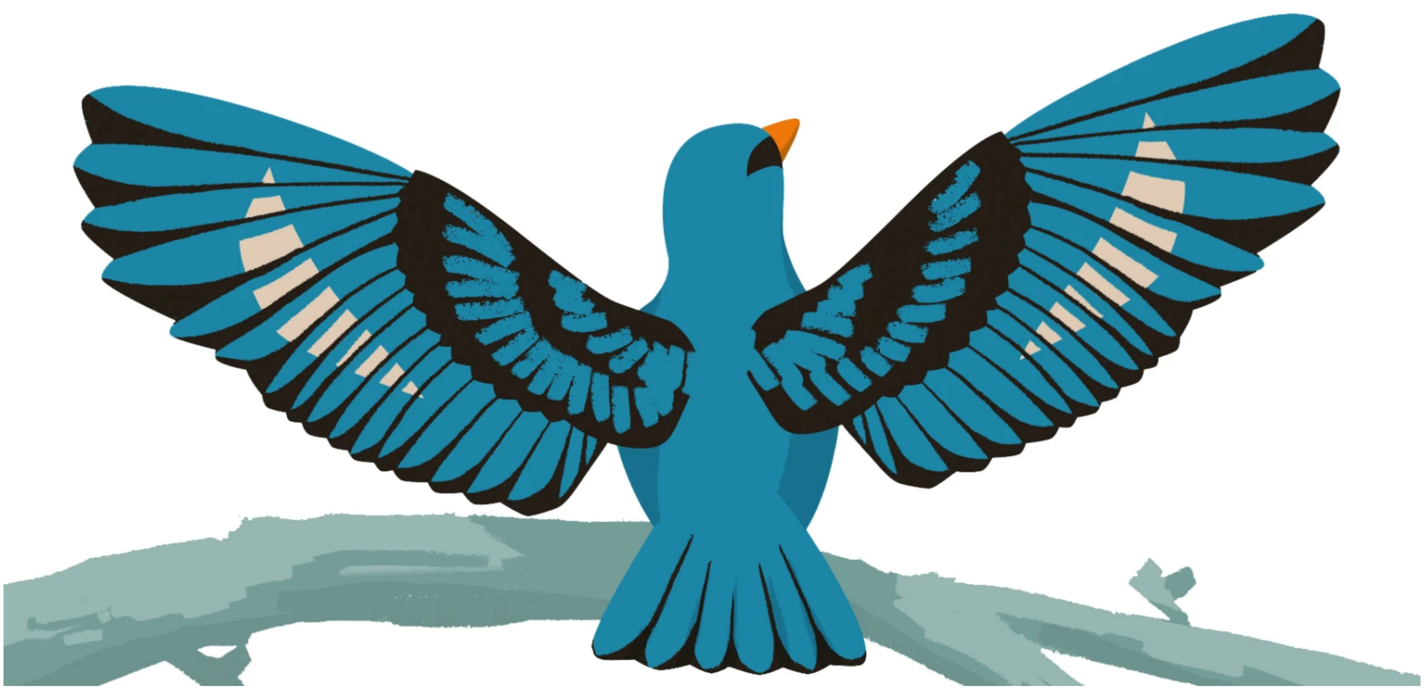
So many of us have mixed feelings about meetings, perhaps more than ever in the era of Zoom. We get frustrated when our calendars fill up with one meeting after another — yet feel left out, or even insulted, when we are not invited to some gathering we hear others are attending.

That's because, in higher education, meetings are more than meetings.

They're not just tools for getting our work done. Meetings are what the anthropologist Helen B. Schwartzman calls "sense making" events. It's through meetings, she argues, that we learn how our organization is functioning, clarify our roles and expectations, and receive clues about our standing.

Given their importance and potential, why are so many meetings boring, unproductive, and unnecessarily contentious? More important, how can we make them better? You've come to the right place for answers. This *Chronicle* guide will explore how to make your meetings effective, inclusive, and maybe — just maybe — even a little bit fun.

I led more than my share of meetings during my 30 years in higher-education administration, and I continue to do so now as an organizational consultant working with colleges and universities. In advising others on meeting strategy and planning my own meetings, I suggest beginning with five key questions.



Question 1: What am I trying to accomplish with this meeting?

You've probably seen the "that could have been an email" meme, or maybe even sent it to colleagues after an especially unproductive session. Since you do not want anyone to feel that way about a meeting you've organized, think about its purpose before sending invitations. Think hard about what you are hoping to accomplish and whether bringing people together — physically or virtually — is the only or best way to achieve the results you seek.

In a classic 1976 article, "How to Run a Meeting," published in the *Harvard Business Review*, Antony Jay observes that many meetings are held "for historical rather than practical reasons" and that "many long-established committees are little more than memorials to dead problems."

Jay is still right. Don't hold a meeting every first Tuesday at 3 p.m., simply because your department has always held a meeting every first Tuesday at 3 p.m. Schedule one *only* when you are clear on its purpose and convinced that a meeting is the superior path toward your desired goals.

What might those goals be? Consciously or unconsciously, we schedule meetings to achieve one or more of the following:

- **Building identity.** As Jay noted in 1976, meetings make it clear who is on the team: "Those present belong to it; those absent do not." There is value in bringing people together to solidify a sense of belonging. But be careful: That can't be the only reason to meet. Asking people to come together without a meaningful agenda can prove frustrating. While keeping the goal of building a collective identity top of mind, make sure your meeting has tangible aims as well.
- **Sharing information.** This is a common reason to gather the troops yet often leads to the dullest meetings, unless the information you're sharing is especially interesting or surprising. It's almost always better to share information digitally — except of course when it's sensitive or complex. Then, you're better off sharing the details during a meeting when you can answer the inevitable questions and try to resolve any anxiety or confusion.
- **Collecting information.** This is another common reason for scheduling a meeting: The organizer wants to obtain information from others. Often it's a manager or project leader who needs updates from various members of the team. While this type of meeting can seem efficient to the person collecting the information, it tends to be tedious for everyone else.
- **Coordination.** In her book *The Art of Gathering: How We Meet and Why It Matters,* Priya Parker writes, "We gather to solve problems we can't solve on our own." When interdependence is a critical characteristic of the work, meetings can provide valuable connection points that enable colleagues to check in on progress, troubleshoot issues, and plan next steps.
- **Plotting strategy and generating ideas.** Meetings can be effective venues for collecting new ideas. Do you need a strategy to increase success rates in introductory math courses? Do you want input on how to manage a pending budget reduction? If so, a meeting is the right venue for exploring options.
- **Making decisions.** Hold a meeting if you need to make a choice among two or more alternatives, and you need a group's blessing to move forward.

- **Learning something.** Are you trying to build your group's collective intelligence? Would learning about a new trend or technique from a presentation or guest speaker energize the group? Would reviewing the factors that led to a pilot project's uneven results increase the likelihood of success next time? Would discussing the findings from an off-campus housing survey help attendees be more responsive to student needs? If so, schedule a meeting.
- **Building common purpose.** A meeting can help the members of a department or group to clarify mutual goals and aspirations and increase their commitment to achieving those aims. Meetings can be especially effective venues for increasing a sense of solidarity and generating the energy required to move work forward.
- **Creating connections.** Through meetings, individuals can come to know, trust, and respect one another. Connections reduce feelings of loneliness and isolation, while making it easier to get things done, especially in complex settings. When group members are not in close physical proximity on a regular basis, meetings, both virtual and in person, can help members forge tighter relationships and increase their sense of camaraderie.

While meetings serve many functions, attendees consider the most successful meetings to be those in which they learned something new, made progress in moving their work forward through coordination, or increased their understanding of and commitment to shared goals.

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Question 2: Who should be invited?

That's a far more complex question than it seems. Answering it well requires you to be thoughtful, not just about who you are inviting, but why.

In *Simple Sabotage: A Modern Field Manual for Detecting & Rooting Out Everyday Behaviors That Undermine Your Workplace,* Robert M. Galford, Bob Frisch, and Cary Greene argue that meetings, committees, and project teams are most effective when they are populated with people who can serve in one of four roles:

- **Worker:** someone who is there to get things done.
- **Wisdom:** a person who has smart ideas or perspectives to share.
- **Wealth:** a participant with money or resources to contribute.
- **Window dressing:** someone whose main reason for being at the meeting is to increase the group's status.

I would expand that list of "W" roles to include two additional categories:

- **Warrior:** This person may be someone who may attempt to block your progress, especially if you fail to include them in a discussion. While warriors can make meetings contentious, it can be useful to include them in your meetings to understand how they think and provide them with an opportunity to hear the perspectives of others.
- **Watcher:** This is someone who may not have much to contribute to the conversation but can use the meeting as a way to learn about organizational dynamics, member personalities, intergroup relationships, and even political strategy. Watchers may attend on a regular basis or be invited to sit in on special occasions. Depending on their status and the type of gathering, watchers may benefit from a reminder that their primary role is to be observers rather than participants. For example, if two new data analysts are invited to an enrollment-planning meeting with your deans, they should probably not offer unsolicited opinions on tuition-pricing strategies.

When there are options for whom to include, always strive to populate the meeting with a diversity of perspectives and experiences. Doing so will broaden everyone's thinking, and a more representative group will increase the legitimacy of any conclusions you reach.

Keep it small. When it comes to using meetings to get work done, the optimal group size is no more than seven. There is a reason Jeff Bezos insisted that Amazon project teams be small enough to require just two pizzas to feed all members.

Productivity is not the only reason to keep meetings as small as possible. Research reveals that participant behavior deteriorates as group size increases. In their article "Team Size and Quality of Group Experience: The More the Merrier?" three researchers described their finding that larger groups are more likely to demonstrate counterproductive behaviors such as boastfulness, parasitism, interpersonal aggression, and misuse of resources. So limit the size of your meetings if you want to reduce the likelihood that people will show up late, say hurtful things to colleagues, claim credit for work they did not do, or read email rather than actively participate.

You may be wondering how to reconcile that advice with the practical realities of higher ed, where broad representation is expected in almost every setting. There is a solution: Big meetings and small meetings. Use small meetings — such as subcommittees — to get work done. Large gatherings can be less frequent and serve to build collective identity and review small-group progress.

At this point, you have determined the purpose of your meeting and created an invitation list. It is time to organize the agenda.

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Question 3: What is the best way to structure this meeting?

One key to running an effective meeting is taking the time to design it carefully. Here are some essential planning techniques to make sure your meeting is as productive as possible:

Clarify in advance how you expect meeting participants to show up. If some (or all) participants will be attending virtually, let them know in advance if you expect them to use their video. While being able to see faces generally makes a gathering more cohesive and engaging, video fatigue is real, so consider whether "cameras on" is truly critical. Of course, always provide a dial-in number for times when internet service fails.

Make introductions. When a group is coming together for the first time, ask participants to give the basics: name, department, role. But also ask them to share one more piece of information — work-related or not — that might help build connections. For example, you could ask attendees to share what they hope to contribute, offer a word that characterizes an effective meeting, or list a hobby they pursue. It can be fun to learn that the meeting group includes a goat-cheese maker, a marathon runner, and a drummer in a local band.

Name-tent cards can be useful for an in-person setting, especially if your group has a lot of newcomers. At a large gathering, when people will be moving around in small-group conversations, provide name tags.

Agree on the rules of operation. Recurring meetings will feel more inclusive and productive when guided by commitments that participants had a say in creating. A set of operating agreements outlines how the members want to interact and provides a pledge of sorts that can be referenced when someone fails to honor a commitment (*"We agreed that we would not revisit issues that have already been decided"*) or breaks a rule (*"We agreed that we would not use phones or laptops during our discussions"*). Several resources are available on how to create these "group agreements" — a process that often takes less than 10 minutes.

Agenda, agenda, agenda. A well-designed agenda is a critical foundation for an effective meeting. Here again, giving people a say makes for a smoother and more productive meeting. Rather than design the schedule completely on your own, invite attendees to suggest agenda items. That practice surfaces issues that you might not have realized need attention. But it also increases everyone's interest and investment in the meeting.

For each agenda item, be clear about its purpose: Is it to share information? Collect input? Analyze options? Or make a decision?

The most effective agendas assign time limits to each topic — 10 minutes for a discussion on modest changes to an investment policy, 20 minutes for a presentation on endowment performance, 30 minutes to reach a decision on how many new development officers to hire next year.

Timed agendas can be especially useful when you have to manage difficult personalities during a meeting. Imagine planning to spend about five minutes announcing a new departmental template for course syllabi, only to have the meeting hijacked by an outraged colleague who views this standardized document as a form of oppression that challenges the fundamental tenets of academic freedom.

Rather than eat up meeting time on a protracted debate, or potentially insult this colleague by trying to cut off the ranting, you can simply point to your agenda and say: *"I'm sorry, but we've allocated only five minutes for this item. You and I can continue this conversation later this week."* That's a respectful way to end an unproductive conversation and ensure the meeting keeps moving.

Keep it as short as possible. The longer the meeting, the more fatigued your participants will be. In my experience, meetings that run longer than 90 minutes tend to lead to disengagement.

My advice is to keep it under an hour. Shorter, more focused sessions can be more productive. If a meeting will last more than an hour, offer a five- to seven-minute break so that participants can stretch or use the restroom. People are better thinkers and contributors when they are comfortable.

Location matters. Good meeting spaces are scarce on campuses and it can be tempting to default to using that dark and sad departmental conference room because it is always open. But don't underestimate how much participant mood can be affected by factors such as good lighting and art on the walls. Try to find aesthetically pleasing meeting venues that encourage creativity and reduce torpor.

Ask people to weigh in on a key topic *before* the meeting. Rather than announce a meeting to "brainstorm" options, why not get a head start and give the meeting some structure by soliciting perspectives in advance? For instance, create a quick online survey to ask for narrative commentary on three to five questions about the topic. Meeting participants will generally appreciate your synthesizing the results, but be sure to report full responses for those who might question your analysis.

Likewise, meetings tend to be far more productive when you distribute the agenda and any pre-reads ahead of time. Attendees then know what lies ahead and have the information they need to participate fully. Let them know if they will be expected to make a decision at the meeting so they can begin considering their options.

Be clear about when the meeting will actually start. Franklin P. Jones, a mid-20th-century columnist, is reputed to have said: "The trouble with being punctual is that nobody's there to appreciate it." That is certainly true if you, as the meeting convener, have a reputation for starting the official business 15 minutes after the listed start time.

It is important to appreciate that punctuality is a social construct, and arriving by an appointed time matters more in some cultures than in others. That is why the key to managing meeting start times is to agree on — and communicate clearly — the arrival standards. If strict punctuality is expected, then a meeting scheduled to begin at noon should begin at noon, and the group's time should not be wasted by catching up chronic latecomers on what happened before they showed up.

For administrators, arriving late is often a function of back-to-back commitments. Organizers can make life easier for everyone by scheduling meetings to end 10 minutes before the top or bottom of an hour to give people extra time between gatherings.

Encourage early arrival for pre-meeting socializing. When gathering in person or virtually, make sure the room is open at least 10 minutes before your meeting starts so people can chat before things officially get going. In virtual settings, open the meeting at least five to seven minutes before the stated start time to allow for casual conversation and check-ins.

Be clear about the group's purpose and authority. Here's an all-too-common scenario: *The task force you assembled to choose a new learning-management system did months of research, watched countless demonstrations, and collected feedback from multiple users. The final report clearly outlined the pros and cons of all the available options and made an unequivocal recommendation. When the provost chose a different option, members expressed outrage about all of their wasted effort.*

Such situations are entirely avoidable. You must be clear at the outset about what your group's role will be: Is it to make a final choice? Report the top three options, either ranked or unranked? Provide a strengths-and-weaknesses analysis for several possibilities? Clarify early and often who has ultimate decision-making power.

Don't rely on PowerPoints. A slide presentation during an in-person meeting directs everyone's focus to the screen and away from one another. That phenomenon is magnified in virtual meetings where attendees often disappear from the screen, making it hard to assess their interest and reactions.

Use PowerPoint and similar tools sparingly to encourage group participation. And if you do choose to share or project documents, be sure they are not too wordy because what might work well on a large screen can be indecipherable when viewed on a laptop.

Design "pulse-taking" moments during meetings. Video platforms have multiple options to allow people to weigh in anonymously and safely. Functions such as Yes/No; thumbs up/down/sideways; and polling are easy tools to gauge consensus. To solicit more detailed ideas or concerns, some platforms allow all participants to use a common name (such as "**" or "Me") in support of anonymity. When meeting participants are gathered in person, make use of hand raising, thumbs up/down/sideways, and phone-based polling apps.

Use small groups. The larger the group, the harder it is to have meaningful debate and dialogue. When you want to generate ideas or wrestle with options, break your participants into small groups. If you only have access to one big meeting room, assign a corner of it to each group. If participants are meeting virtually, use the platform's breakout-room function.

Leverage the power of silence. Some people find out what they think once words leave their mouths, while others prefer to think before they speak. Try to give participants a few minutes to make notes in silence before you invite them to weigh in on important topics. You might be surprised by the quality of the responses.

The power of silence can also be used in a technique called "1-2-4-All." Here's how it works: A question is posed to the group and each person is given a few minutes to write down their thoughts. That is "one." Participants then pair up to discuss what they have written. That's "two." Next, two pairs come together to compare and contrast their responses. That is "four." Finally, everyone comes back together for the "all" part of the discussion. This process allows both introverts and extroverts to have a say and refines ideas in a constructive manner.

Assign a devil's advocate. To prevent groupthink, announce that at least one participant will play the role of devil's advocate in meeting deliberations. That person takes a contrary view to the main options and solutions presented, and prompts participants to reconsider, defend, and refine their arguments. Because the devil's advocate is viewed as simply playing a role, ideas and approaches can be challenged in a way that does not feel personal or hurtful.

Rotate who holds the gavel. Meetings often are led by the person in the room with the most power in the organization. It is hard to be both a meeting facilitator *and* a full participant — few of us can balance both roles effectively. Consider rotating leadership responsibilities to help all team members build that muscle and to encourage broad participation.

If you have more power than others, be quiet, at least at first. If you are a group leader, or considered to have more power than others in the meeting, let those folks express their opinions before sharing your own. When you go first, that can discourage anyone with conflicting points of view from speaking up.

Even if you have a clear purpose, a well-considered participant list, and a thoughtfully designed meeting structure — all of which enhance the quality and outcomes of your meeting — things still might not go smoothly. What can go wrong? Oh, so many things.

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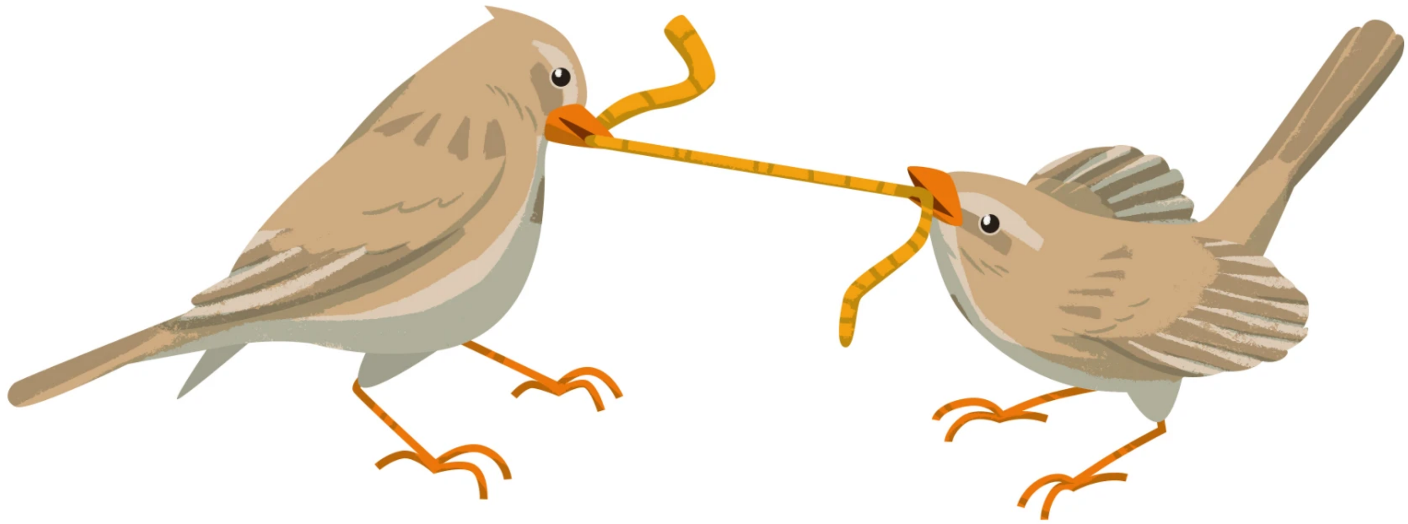

Question 4: How can unproductive dynamics be anticipated and managed?

Before she became famous for her lip-syncing talents, the comedian Sarah Cooper wrote a book on *100 Tricks to Appear Smart in Meetings.* In it, she observes that meetings “generally fall into one of three categories: painful, useless, and soul-crushing.” Cooper makes fun of meeting dynamics and the frequent political posturing therein: The folks who ask a presenter to “go back a slide” in order to underscore that they, at least, are paying serious attention; the tendency of some participants to make a show of translating percentages into fractions; and the people nodding continuously while pretending to take notes.

While these behaviors prompt eye-rolling, they do not unduly disrupt meeting agendas. There are many other ways to do that. As a meeting leader, it is important to anticipate the various tactics that people may employ to create conflict and block progress — and be ready to respond with appropriate mitigation strategies. Here are some common obstruction techniques and some advice on how to respond.

The aggressive interruption. Most people in a meeting can stand their ground when interrupted, but not everyone is comfortable pushing back against someone who is loud, persistent, and opinionated. As the meeting facilitator, you have the power to make sure that voices are heard and sentences are finished.

How should you proceed? If your group reached an agreement on how to handle interruptions (Question 3), point to those rules. If not, intervene to suggest that each person speak once before others can comment again.

Whether or not gender is an issue in meeting dynamics, you might also want to take some advice from Veronica Rueckert’s book, *Outspoken: Why Women’s Voices Get Silenced and How to Set Them Free.* When a meeting participant interrupts someone who is speaking, Rueckert suggests you interject with, *"I was really interested to hear the rest of what Donna had to say."* When interrupting becomes a pattern, you may need to be more direct: *"Max, you interrupted Leticia. I know we all want to hear what she has to say."*

Because interrupting an interrupter can be especially difficult in virtual meetings, announce in advance that you have designated a "silencer" to mute attendees who will not stop talking.

The history lesson. It's easy to get frustrated when someone proposes a reasonable idea and is immediately shot down with, "We tried that in (insert year) and it didn't work."

But before you discount that response as coming from someone who is out of touch with current realities, stuck in the past, or intent on blocking progress, be open to the possibility that the comment might be coming from a genuine desire to be useful and help the group avoid repeating a mistake. Resist the urge to respond with a heavy sigh or a snarky comment about how life has changed since the 1990s. Instead, assume this colleague has good intentions and ask, *"What lessons from that experience can be applied here?"* Or, *"Given that experience, what would you recommend?"*

The roadblock to progress. Have you ever wondered if meeting attendees are being difficult on purpose or following some secret instruction guide for making meetings especially painful?

It turns out such a guide exists. The once-classified *Simple Sabotage Field Manual* was developed by the U.S. Office of Strategic Services, the nation's intelligence agency during World War II. The guide was used to train citizen-saboteurs in foreign countries to disrupt the enemy's war efforts quietly and discreetly. The manual includes a host of tactics, including advice on blocking progress or decision-making in meetings. The manual's recommendations may resonate with your academic-meeting experiences:

- Pontificate: "Talk as frequently as possible and at great length. Illustrate your 'points' by long anecdotes and accounts of personal experiences."
- Focus on the trivial: "Bring up irrelevant issues as frequently as possible."
- Nitpick over phrasing: "Haggle over precise wordings of communications, minutes, resolutions."
- Reopen debate: "Refer back to matters decided upon at the last meeting and attempt to reopen the question of the advisability of that decision."
- Advocate caution: "Urge your fellow-conferees to be 'reasonable' and avoid haste which might result in embarrassments or difficulties later on."
- Express concerns about the propriety of any decision: "Raise the question of whether such action as is contemplated lies within the jurisdiction of the group or whether it might conflict with the policy of some higher echelon."

Your goal should be to design a meeting that makes it difficult for attendees to succeed in such tactics. Here, too, it helps to shut down those behaviors if you can point to agreed-upon meeting rules that might include:

- We will stick to established time limits for each agenda item.
- We will not revisit decisions after they have been made (unless there is group consensus to do so).
- “Good enough” is our path to progress. We can always iterate later.
- We will not spend meeting time engaged in painful group editing of documents.

The personal attack. Debate and demands for evidence are common in academic settings and there is a general expectation that some meetings will be especially spirited. Sometimes, however, the conversation can turn mean. When that happens, people tend to get quiet — who wants to engage with a bully?

Meeting leaders who are uncomfortable with conflict may try to either change the subject or stick to the agenda when a bully starts acting out. But savvy meeting facilitators know that everyone is watching for clues about what constitutes acceptable meeting behavior. Here are three options for responding to aggressive commentary:

- Calling it out — in a somewhat monotone manner — can be useful, at least at first. Without showing annoyance or raising your voice in any way, try: *“Antoinette, it is fine to raise concerns, but let’s hear what else Miguel has to say.”*
- If the behavior continues, be more pointed: *“Antoinette, calling Miguel ‘an administration toady’ is not productive.”*
- If Antoinette persists, you might ask her to explain herself: *“Let’s take a few moments to learn what you are trying to accomplish by name calling. The floor is all yours.”*

Remember that silence emboldens bullies. If you fail to deal with bad behavior when it happens, you can look forward to more and more of it in the days ahead.

Don’t go it alone. You already have multiple logistics to manage in running a meeting. So when it comes to managing disruptive behavior, you may need backup. Here are a few strategies:

- Assign a timekeeper so you don’t have to watch the clock on each agenda item.
- Before your meeting, ask a senior colleague to speak up if comments are unnecessarily acerbic or even abusive.
- Ask a couple of colleagues to support you in making sure everyone feels included and respected. Some effective phrases: *“I like how you built on Chen’s earlier idea”* and *“Martin, we haven’t heard from you yet. What do you recommend?”*

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Now that you're prepared to deal with any bad actors, it's time to get some actual work done. Let's explore your options for moving from analysis to action.

Question 5: What are the best ways to make decisions and move forward?

For many reasons, which I won't belabor, decision-making in higher education can take a long time. That tendency makes it imperative for anyone running a meeting in an academic setting to be well-versed in group decision-making techniques and adept at determining which to use in varied circumstances. Here are eight approaches I've found most effective:

Wait to weigh in. As a meeting leader, you usually have more power than other participants either because of your role at the institution or simply because you are running this gathering. As I mentioned, given the real or perceived power differentials that may exist, it is generally best to invite others to share their perspectives before you do. Do your best to stay quiet for as long as you can so that people don't feel you are dictating how to proceed and are comfortable sharing opinions that might differ from yours.

Begin the decision-making process *before* the meeting. Have you ever watched in awe as a meeting leader quickly reached consensus on what you expected would be a knockdown, drag-out fight on a contentious issue? That was not "meeting magic" that you observed, it was likely the fruits of pre-meeting strategy. Experienced leaders and participants do not begin important meetings without having a sense of where key figures stand on vital issues. They have conversations in advance to ask, *"Where are you leaning?"* or *"Which* *option do you consider most problematic?"* in order to resolve concerns or revise proposals to make them more acceptable.

Aim for consensus, not vote counting. Americans tend to define majority rule as the gold standard for making decisions. Yet plenty of evidence suggests that voting does not always lead to the best results, especially when those on the losing side — feeling ignored or marginalized — opt to withdraw from future discussions. For that reason, among others, it's better to try to build consensus among the participants rather than merely collecting enough votes to prevail.

Consensus is not a synonym for compromise. Don't assume that getting everyone to agree will lead to a mediocre solution. On the contrary, consensus decisions are often superior to majority decisions because the former tend to be more creative and less subject to future challenges.

It is true that reaching consensus can be much harder than voting, but certain techniques can help move everyone to agreement. To illustrate, let's consider five strategies that might be applied by a search committee that is considering how to choose three finalists from among seven candidates who did well during initial interviews.

Criteria matrices. Given the unconscious or even conscious biases that can influence decision-making, using a matrix can make it easier for meeting participants to evaluate options based on specific criteria. In our hiring hypothetical, the search committee would check those criteria for all seven candidates on a matrix before moving on to interviews. This approach makes it more difficult for people to pick their preferred candidates based on vague factors (such as "fit") that tend to exclude candidates of different backgrounds or perspectives.

First, through group conversation, agree on the most important criteria for *this stage* of the screening process. These seven candidates already have the main disciplinary backgrounds for the position. So this next level of evaluation would include other criteria such as: interest in teaching honors courses, experience leading study-abroad programs, expertise in building inclusive learning environments, or knowledge of new technology.

Talk about whether each candidate does or does not meet each criterion and then create a table that looks like this:

Criteria	Cand. 1	Cand. 2	Cand. 3	Cand. 4	Cand. 5	Cand. 6	Cand. 7
Criteria 1	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Criteria 2	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
Criteria 3	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	No	Yes
Criteria 4	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes
Criteria 5	No	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	No
Yes Scores	3	5	4	4	5	3	3

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Candidates with the highest scores are not necessarily the best applicants to move forward. But being able to see where each stands — from the group's perspective — can prompt deep discussion and consensus. If you are up for harder math, you can use a high/medium/low scale and assign scores that way.

Bucketing. In this technique, each committee member places the candidates' names into one of three buckets: high, medium, or low. High votes are assigned three points; medium votes, two; and low votes, one. Candidates are then ranked based on the points they received.

Again, the rankings should not be used to make a decision, but rather, to take the pulse of the committee and continue the discussion. If there is general agreement on candidates in the buckets, the conversation can focus on where disagreement exists and why.

Multivoting. This strategy is designed to narrow the range of options under discussion at a meeting. So for our example, the names of the top seven candidates would be written on flip charts and each member given three dot stickers to indicate their preferences. All three dots could even go to a single candidate. Some virtual meeting platforms allow for a similar process.

Again, this is not a final way to make a decision, but a technique to reveal how the group is leaning. Polling apps can be used in a similar fashion for both in-person and virtual meetings.

100 points, divided. In this more-nuanced form of multi-voting, each meeting participant is given 100 points to distribute among a range of possibilities. For our hypothetical search committee, this process would help reveal the degree of interest in each of the seven candidates.

Negative voting. This method is designed to eliminate from future consideration options that group members consider unacceptable. In a search-committee setting, participants could be asked to list the candidates who shouldn't move forward. If there is consensus on removing their names, they can be excluded. If not, dissenting voters can make the case for keeping them in the candidate pool.

In some cases, it may be necessary to use two or more of these techniques to find points of full agreement. For a more comprehensive list of meeting-decision techniques, I highly recommend Ava S. Butler's *Mission Critical Meetings: 81 Practical Facilitation Techniques*.

Once your meeting is over and decisions have been made, it is time to ensure that what you committed to doing actually gets done. Document the specific actions that need to happen, assign an "owner" to each step, and set a completion date. Importantly, make sure to revisit the list of assignments on a regular basis.

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Question 6: How can the next meeting be even better?

I snuck this question in as a special bonus for those committed to superior meeting management. The answer is simple: Ask for feedback. While not every meeting merits a review, when it makes sense to check in with the group, here are three easy ways to collect useful insights in about five minutes.

A plus/delta review. To use this approach, draw a line down the middle of a flip chart or white board and write a plus sign (+) at the top of the left column and a change/delta on the right. Then document the answers to two questions:

- "What went well about this meeting?"
- "What could we do better next time?"

Use the results to discuss key themes and consider whether changes should be made to future meetings.

One word. Pose a few questions about the meeting and allow each participant to respond with a single word. For example, in response to "How are you feeling about the process we used to make decisions today?" people might reply with "hopeful," "frustrated," or "skeptical." Again, use the responses to spark a discussion about how the meeting could be managed better next time.

Brief surveys. A post-meeting survey is a good option but is most effective when everyone actually completes it. Work toward setting a group norm of 100-percent participation. Using a polling app, online survey, or even a paper document, ask one to five questions. Here are a few to consider:

- Did you feel heard?
- Did you feel comfortable expressing your honest opinions?
- What did you most appreciate about today's meeting?
- What might have made this meeting better?
- Did we act in accordance with our group agreements? Why or why not?
- Who talked and who did not?
- What would have made you feel more included?
- Did you obtain the information you needed?
- What did you learn?
- Was this a good use of your time?
- What should we do next time to ensure a better meeting experience?

Ending meetings with reflection time can help you improve the design of future sessions, and that is certainly an important reason to ask for feedback on a regular basis. However, the practice serves another important purpose: It reminds meeting participants that they are key partners in making gatherings successful.

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Resources

Books

- *Mission Critical Meetings: 81 Practical Facilitation Techniques,* by Ava S. Butler.
- *Rituals for Virtual Meetings: Creative Ways to Engage People and Strengthen Relationships,* by Kürsat Özenç and Glenn Fajardo.
- *The Surprising Science of Meetings: How You Can Lead Your Team to Peak Performance*, by Steven G. Rogelberg.

Journal articles

- "Virtual Meetings: Reflecting on Lessons Learned From the Past Year to Create a Systematic Approach to More Effective Meetings," published in 2021 in *The Journal of Continuing Education in Nursing* and written by Rodnita K. Davis, Kristy S. Chunta, and Michele Gerwick.
- "Meetings at Work: Perceived Effective and Recommended Improvements," published in 2015 in the *Journal of Business Research* and written by Jennifer L. Geimer, Desmond J. Leach, Justin A. DeSimone, Steven G. Rogelberg, and Peter B. Warr.
- "Building Trust in Workplace Meetings: Intangible Factors Contributing to Intellectual Capital Enhancement," published in 2020 as part of the 17th International Conference on Intellectual Capital, Knowledge Management & Organizational Learning, and written by Palmira Lopez-Fresno and Taina I. Savolainen.
- "The Promise and Peril of Parallel Chat in Video Meetings for Work," published in the Extended Abstracts of the 2021 CHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems, and written by Advait Sarkar, Sean Rintel, Damian Borowiec, Rachel Bergmann, Sharon Gillett, Danielle Bragg, Nancy Baym, and Abigail Sellen.

Advice articles

Plenty of meeting-management tips have been offered in the pages of the *Harvard Business Review*, including:

- "Stop Wasting People's Time With Bad Meetings"
- "3 Types of Meetings and How to Do Each One Well"
- "Meeting Overload Is a Fixable Problem"
- "Why Your Meetings Stink and What to Do About It"
- "10 Tactics to Keep Your Meeting on Track"
- "Dear Manager: You're Holding Too Many Meetings"

And from *The Chronicle*'s archives:

- "10 Ways to Better Manage Your Meetings"
- "Why We Hate Our Own Meetings"
- "Stop Silencing the Skeptics"
- "Are We Talking Too Much in Video Interviews?"
- "Come Back, Face-to-Face Faculty Meetings: All Is Forgiven"

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We welcome your thoughts and questions about this article. Please email the editors or submit a letter for publication.

LEADERSHIP & GOVERNANCE | CAMPUS CULTURE | CAREER ADVANCEMENT

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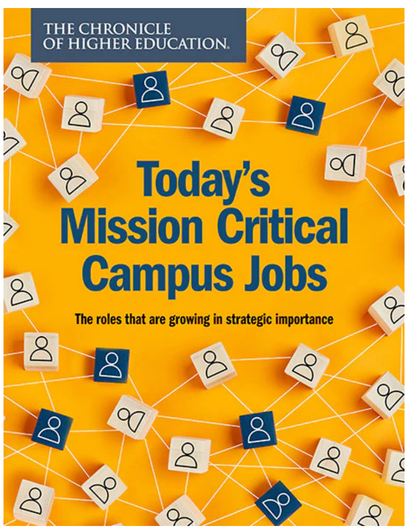
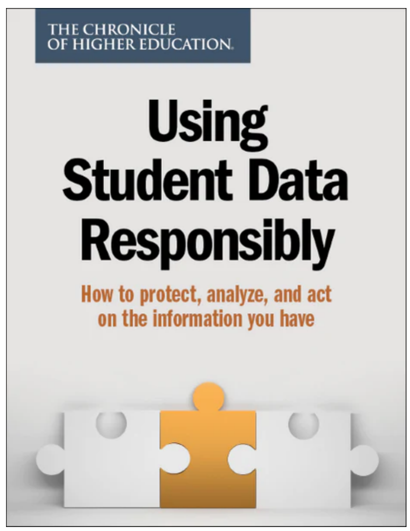
Allison M. Vaillancourt provides organizational consulting services as a vice president and senior consultant in Segal's organizational effectiveness practice. Prior to joining Segal, she spent three decades as an administrator and faculty member at large public research universities. Browse her previous columns in the Management Corner series on administrative-career issues. She is on Twitter @VaillancourtA.

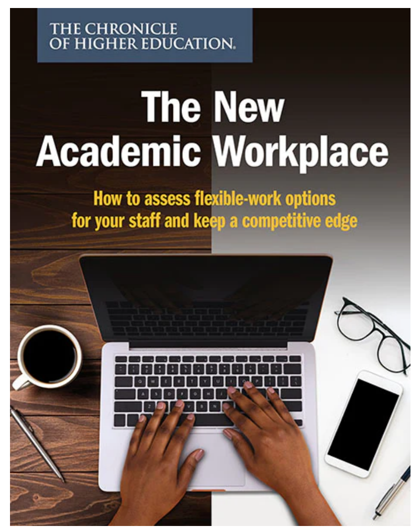
IN THE CHRONICLE STORE



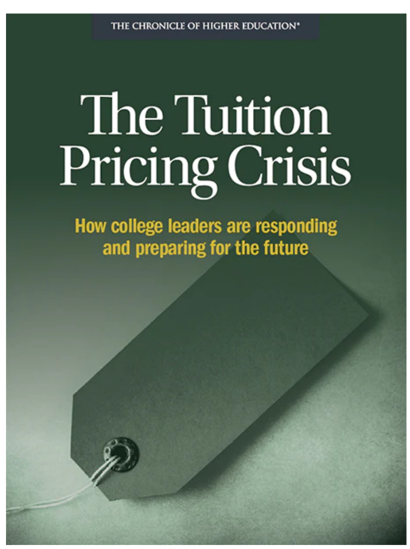
Today's Mission Critical Campus Jobs



Using Student Data Responsibly



The New Academic Workplace



The Tuition Pricing Crisis