STC Board Deliberations on Student Voting

This document is a summary of the process and information that the STC Board used in May through July 2010 to determine whether or not to retain the bylaws with the original restriction on student voting. The Board vote on 13 July 2010 was to retain the bylaws as is.

The American Society of Association Executives (ASAE) advises boards to gather information before making decisions. The process that the STC Board used is similar to ASAE's suggestions for a knowledge-based governance process. This process included several phrases:

Phase 1:   explanation of the context of the issue and relevant information, including historical background on the restriction on student voting

Phase 2:   generation of alternatives

Phase 3:   surveying the membership (called a knowledge-based governance survey to let members know that the information will be used for governance purposes)

Phase 4:   board analysis, discussion, and vote

This document includes the phases, information gathered, and the results.

Phase 1: Context & Relevant Information

Context

The question of whether STC should allow student members to vote in the STC elections became a topic of discussion on Ning during the 2010 election. See http://stcideas.ning.com/forum/topics/student-stc-membership-and?commentId=3511706%3AComment%3A6416.

Information

Relevant Section of Current Bylaws
Article III, Section 2-A
"*Student member*. To be eligible for student membership, a applicant must be (1) enrolled in a accredited university, college, community college, or technical school; (2) taking at least two courses or their equivalent each term; (3) preparing for a career in technical communication."
 Sections 2-B and 2-C go on to define *regular member* and *senior member* , respectively.

Article III, Section 3-A
Voting rights. Each regular and senior member is entitled to one vote on each matter submitted to the membership for a vote. Student members are not entitled to a vote."

Model Bylaws Templates for Chapters

The **model chapter bylaws** template allows chapters to decide whether or not to let students vote at the chapter level.

The **model student chapter bylaws** template allows student chapters to decide whether to let full members (typically the faculty advisor) to vote.

Statistics on Non-Voting Members and Historical Information about Student Members (updated as of April 2011)

- Students make up 8.2% of the membership

- Retired fellows make up .0026% of the membership

- CVP Individuals make up 1.9% of the membership

- Current active 2011 student members: 449

- Current active 2011 retired fellows: 16

- Current active 2011 CVP individuals: 117

- STC's voter turnout in 2010 (14%) is typical for an individual membership organization (national or international level) where there is nothing related to labor/wages/working conditions or lobbying involved. The voter turnout for 2011 was 19.6%, which is among the highest rates STC has had since electronic voting was introduced.

- Students members have a very high turnover rate; rarely staying a member more than 3 years. This is also very typical for most associations, except for medical specialties. (Student renewal rate in 2010 was 36% versus 53% for the general membership; to date in 2011, the student renewal rate is 29% versus 60% for the general membership.)

- A very low percentage of student members become full members the year they graduate; they generally drop out. This is also very typical for most associations.

- A small percentage of student members return to become members in STC a few years later.

- However, those who were student members and end up being STC members are eager to talk about how important STC was to their learning experience as a student and typically, how important their local chapter experience was.

History on Previous Consideration of Student Voting

From an email from a former board member who was involved in the revision of STC's bylaws in 2007 asking whether the issue of student voting had been considered:

> A change [to allow student voting] was considered for a very short time when updating the bylaws (although as STC's Executive Director mentioned compliance [with New York law] was the larger goal), but here is the reasoning for NOT giving student members the vote:
>
> I think this is a usual and customary approach to student membership. They pay far less than the professional employees, and are also less likely to know all the issues involved in running an organization like STC.
>
> The danger also is that they may vote in their professors, or other Student members into office.

Costs to Allow Student Members to Vote

- Changing bylaws: minor. An hour or so of the Executive Director's time (depending on how long the board discussion takes on this); a few minutes of the webmaster's time to replace on website.

- Cost to service a member is the cost of providing services to all members divided by the number of current members. The current cost, including student members, is $249. Student dues are $75. Therefore, each student membership costs STC $174, a cost that is subsidized by the regular membership. While giving student members the vote will not change the cost to service a member, some members may object to the differential in the dues rates. Therefore, there is the indirect cost of unhappy members.

- Back end programming in house: TBD

- Back end programming by election house for ½ votes: TBD

Phase 2: Alternatives

During this phase, board members were asked to think of all possible pros and cons, regardless of what the board members personally thought. This was an attempt to identify possible considerations that members may have on the subject.

Option 1: Keep the status quo.

Pros

- Consistent with what many associations do.

- Low cost; we don't have to do anything.

Cons

- Treats discounted memberships inconsistently (some vote, some don't).

- Silences at least 8.2% of our membership during STC elections.

Option 2: Give student members the right to vote in elections

Pros

- Is inclusive and could encourage more active (or perhaps longer) participation by students if they feel involved in choosing Society leaders.

- Student members make up 8.2% of our members and that could be significant in terms of upping the % of members who vote even if only 1/3 or 1/2 of these members vote.

- Students with "skin in the game" in their organizations are accustomed to pouring in energy (a job, just no pay). Giving them ownership (a vote) will motivate them to contribute time and to assist in recruiting more junior technical communicators to STC.

- Eager STC students may serve as role models for low energy adults.

- A student leader who participates actively and votes might be more apt to join after graduation as full members, might be elected to the BOD.

- Seeing students vote might encourage more full members to do the same.

Cons

- Professional members may be slighted because they pay full freight and may view the right to vote as something that should come only for those who do.

- It's not typical of what other associations do, unless they are student organizations.

- Cost (We need to understand the impact here.)

- Requires a change in bylaws.

Option 3: The Ning Suggestion

This suggestion was on the Ning thread on this topic:

- Keep core student membership at a discounted rate.

- Remove free Chapter and SIG membership for students.

- Allow students to add Chapters and SIGs at a reduced rate.

- Give students a 1/2 vote in STC Leadership elections.

Pros

- Deals with value of a discounted membership by offering a reduced vote.

- Could address equity issues if raised by full-paying members.

- Shows direct response to member input.

- Gives students some more rights, but makes them give something in return (makes them pay for Chapter or SIG membership). [This is similar to comment about equity issues.]

- Some students may feel more involved in the Society.

Cons

- Could add complexity to election administration. (back-end costs).

- Partial vote still carries a degree of disenfranchisement.

- Is ½ vote rounded up or rounded down in the event of a tie?

- Broadens the issue to include other aspects than just voting (will take more board time and possibly divert us from more important topics).

- Requires a change in bylaws.

- If students lose "free" chapter/SIG membership, they lose potential mentoring opportunities.

- Blowback from professional members, who may request that they be offered a lower rate ($75) because power of their vote will be diluted by allowing students to vote.

Phase 3: Surveying the Membership

The Board surveyed the membership about this issue in June 2010. There were 871 members who participated in the vote. There were 274 comments. While comments were about equally in favor or opposed to student voting in number, of those opposed to student voting, many more comments were more strongly wording in opposition than those in favor. The opposing comments were similar to the possible objections that had previously been identified by board members.

These are the questions asked on the survey.

June 2010 Knowledge-Based Governance Survey: Student Voting

Q1. Should student members be allowed to vote at the Society level?

Answer Options	Response %	Count
Yes, but for Society elections only	21.6%	188
Yes, on all items submitted for vote (e.g. including changes to bylaws)	41.6%	362
No	28.4%	247
I do not have an opinion	8.5%	74
Comments		139
	Answered	871
	Skipped	0

Q.2 Are you currently a student member?

Answer Options	Response %	Count
Yes	6.9%	60
No	93.14%	809
Comments		25
	Answered	869
	Skipped	2

Q.3 Have you ever been a student member?

Answer Options	Response %	Count
Yes	23.8%	206
No	76.2%	659
Comments		41
	Answered	865
	Skipped	6

Q.4 Do you have any other comments or suggestions for the Board on this matter?

Answer Options	Response %	Count
Comments		264
	Answered	264
	Skipped	607

Phase 4: Analysis, Discussion, and Vote

The Board analyzed and voted on the results of the survey at the13 July 2010 meeting. While 41.6% of the membership thought students should be able to vote on all items submitted for a vote, 21.1% thought students should vote only in international level elections, 28.4% were opposed, and 8.5% had no option. Therefore, 36.9% were opposed or had no opinion. While 62.7% thought students should be able to vote in elections, less than half thought students should be able to vote on all matters.

However, of the 28.4% of those who were opposed to students voting either in elections or on other issues, a high percentage wrote strongly worded comments explaining their opposition in no uncertain terms, while only a few in favor of giving the vote were passionate defenders, with many of the comments in favor being lukewarm in tone.

One of the major issues for those opposed to extending the vote to students is that students are preparing for the profession, and STC is not a student organization. Therefore, the vote should be limited to those who were practicing the profession. There was a suggestion that the issue be turned over to the CAC; however, there was consensus that this is not primarily a communities issue since communities already have the power (through the model bylaws template) to determine whether students can vote at that level.

There was a motion that the Board direct Executive Director Kathryn Burton to write the proposed amendment to allow student members to vote and that the Board should consider the amendment at its next meeting. The motion did not carry.

A summary of the survey and the Board vote appeared on 20 July 2010 in STC's blog at http://notebook.stc.org/open-mike-2/.