

The Role of the Department Chair

Today's department chair has one of the most paradoxical roles in the institution. The chair's role is a crucial leadership position, yet it doesn't carry undisputed authority -- a strong coalition of faculty can seriously impede a chair's ability to lead. The Dean and senior administration rely on the chair to shape the department and serve as the primary agent of change when it comes to policies, procedures and institutional mandates. On the other hand, the faculty view themselves as instigators and authors of departmental change. Administratively, the staff may see themselves as running the department, but the chair is ultimately responsible for curriculum, planning, budget matters and personnel management. In addition students, alumni, donors, granting agencies, central administration, the Regents, legislators and the public, from time to time, provide input or influence on departmental matters.

The department chair serves as the crucial link between the administration and faculty. Communication must flow in both directions through the chair, and the chair must be able to explain and persuade faculty members, the dean and administrators of what is best for both the department and the institution.

The department chair's work covers a wide range of activities, issues and potential problem areas:

- **Department governance and office management** (shared governance, management of staff, administrative tasks)
- **Curriculum and program development** (instruction, research, service, planning, scheduling, department assessment, accreditation and program review, graduate dissertations)
- **Faculty** (recruitment, hiring, promotion, tenure, retention, evaluation, scheduling, discipline and conflict mediation)
- **Students** (recruitment, retention, student organizations, learning outcomes)
- **Communication and fund raising with external audiences** (granting agencies, accrediting agencies, community, legislators, donors, businesses, foundations)
- **Financial management** (budget planning and management)
- **Facilities management** (space allocation, lab space, resources, equipment)

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From Faculty Member to Department Chair

Many chairs are not prepared for the role shift from individual faculty member to department chair. John Bennett (1983)¹ identified three major transitions that new chairs experience.

1. Moving from being a specialist to functioning as a generalist.

A new chair must quickly acquire a grasp of the entire department and all its offerings. The new chair is responsible for understanding all the specializations, as well as a new range of duties that faculty members never have to perform.

2. The shift from functioning as an individual to running a collective.

Faculty are used to working independently, setting their own office hours and determining when to work on their research, course preparation and other duties. Chairs must impede this autonomy by orchestrating collective activity such as meetings, class times and events. In addition, chairs are called upon to gain consensus and cooperation from faculty on decisions affecting the department.

3. The shift from loyalty to one's discipline to loyalty to the institution.

Chairs must balance the needs of the discipline with the needs of the institution. They serve as spokespersons for the institu-

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Power

Pulled in many directions and devoid of supreme power, the role of chair requires leadership skill to move the department. Chairs are equipped with some formal authority by the nature of the title of Department Chair. Their approval is required for many day-to-day actions to occur within the department. The chair has positional power regarding recommendation for pay raises, promotion, tenure, teaching assignments and allocation of resources. Positional power regarding faculty extends to writing of letters of recommendation, introductions to professional acquaintances, recommendation for membership or leadership roles in professional associations, and contacts for external consulting jobs.

Personal power and influence is perhaps the chair's best tool. A well-respected chair, who is perceived as open, honest and credible, can ask for and receive faculty cooperation. This personal power must be earned. It is based on a high level of credibility with many constituencies (faculty members, the Dean, administrators) a good reputation in one's discipline and the proven ability to gain resources for the department. Strong interpersonal communication skills are also necessary for personal power and influence. Chairs with low personal power and credibility will encounter resistance to their ideas and are ineffective change agents for the institution.

Direct Leadership Impact

Most chairs, recently plucked from a peer relationship with colleagues, have difficulty with the concept of power. Another way to look at it is to consider the direct leadership impact of a department chair. Chairs have the ability to influence the department's climate and culture, the opportunity to shape the future of the department and the responsibility to guide department dialog in positive and fruitful directions. A chair, using personal power, influence and leadership has the ability to set the tone and re-invigorate an unmotivated, fractious or stagnant department for the benefit of individuals, the department as a whole and the institution. In this respect no other leadership role within the academy has as much direct impact on the quality and future of the institution as a department chair. ■

Adapted from:

Hecht, Higgerson, Gmelch and Tucker (1999). [The Department Chair as Academic Leader](#). Phoenix, Arizona: American Council on Education Oryx Press.

tional perspective, as well as the communicator for departmental needs. Chairs who cannot shift to supporting the institution's perspective when necessary are not able to fulfill their institutional leadership role. ■

¹Bennett, John B. (1983). *Managing the academic department: Cases and notes*. New York: American Council on Education/Macmillan.

Adapted from:

Hecht, Higgerson, Gmelch and Tucker (1999). *The Department Chair as Academic Leader*. Phoenix, Arizona: American Council on Education Oryx Press.

Advice for Chairs

Seek Advice

Chairing a department involves so many different aspects of administrative, management and people skills that it is very easy to make mistakes. When in doubt seek advice before taking action. It is far better to ask and learn than to try to outlive a big mistake in the eyes of faculty.

Learn to say “no”, but don’t back yourself into a corner when making decisions

No one can please everyone. If you try, you may well end up pleasing no one. At the same time, making hasty decisions or putting your foot down too firmly and too quickly may lead to an error in judgment that you will wish you could take back. If you are going to make an “absolute” yes or no decision, be sure you have taken enough time to consider all the options.

Care about people

Be sensitive to the needs of everyone in the department, including students, staff and faculty. Try to understand where people are coming from when they raise an issue. Show empathy for others’ points of view. Get to know your faculty members. Learn about their research and teaching interests. Visit your faculty members in their offices and ask how things are going. Take the time to get to know your staff, as well. They keep the department running on a daily basis. Many staff members have been running departments for a long time and can be quite helpful in guiding a new chair.

Be an effective communicator

One of the biggest complaints that faculty have is that they don’t get open and honest information. The chair serves as the communication link between the administration and faculty. This involves more than post-

ing notices or circulating emails. A chair must be able to explain, persuade and address issues as changes occur or new policies are announced.

Avoid the perception of favoritism

Make your criteria for distributing departmental funds clear and consistent. Explain decisions as you make them. Even though some faculty members are easier to get along with than others, you cannot use that as a basis for giving favorable schedules or allocating resources. As a new chair, it is also difficult to step away from your peers and friends into a leadership role without causing resentment or the perception of favoritism. Clearly communicating why you are or are not doing something is the best approach to maintaining a climate of fairness.

Be fair and honest when you evaluate

Evaluating your former peers is difficult. However, you aren’t doing the person or the department a service by not being honest. If someone’s work is not up to standards, it is far better for you to clearly explain that than to let it go and have the person be surprised later when they do not receive an expected promotion. Identify areas for improvement and help the person work on those areas, rather than remaining silent or implying that everything is fine. It is unfair to other faculty members, students or staff to enable someone to continue to under-perform when others are working hard to meet and exceed standards.

Recruit and hire carefully

Follow established legal processes for faculty searches, recruitment and selection. Proceed with care as every faculty member hired may be with your department for years to come. Be sure your decisions take

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into account the future evolution of your department, the student body and the institution, as well as the current need.

Develop and follow written policies and procedures

Familiarize yourself with university policies regarding faculty, staff and students. If your department doesn't already have written guidelines for allocation of department funds for supplies, equipment, faculty development, travel and release time it may be a good idea to develop them. If everyone knows how these things are allocated it will reduce misunderstandings. New faculty, in particular, should be apprised in writing of the department's expectations and procedures regarding promotion and tenure.

Keep written records

Keep written records of important meetings, including date, time, who was present, key decisions, action items and whether or not follow-up is needed. Memories of what was decided can change over time. It is also good to document significant discussions held with individual faculty members in this way. Keep correspondence files and budget files for future reference.

Plan ahead & pay attention to the budget

In order to plan ahead you must understand the goals and vision for the department. Developing these in conjunction with faculty helps to build cooperation and better understanding of decisions. Departmental goals form the basis for planning the budget and resource allocation. Take a leadership role in monitoring the budget to ensure that spending is within allocation and that the expenditures stay in line with the primary goals of the department.

Be innovative and encourage change

Encourage others to be innovative and forgive them their failures if a new idea falls short. Innovation will enable a department to be competitive and take the lead in a field.

Set a good example for faculty

Demonstrate a good work ethic and attendance at department-sponsored events. It is also important to make an effort to stay upbeat and positive. Faculty members will take their lead from the example you set.

Teach at least one course

Teaching helps you to stay current, connects you with students beyond those who find your office to complain, and helps you empathize with faculty concerns.

The chair serves as the communication link between the administration and faculty.

Learn to work effectively with your MSO or department administrator

Understand your role in relationship to the work of your department administrator. As the chair you are the leader and decision maker, planning for the future of the department. A strong partnership, respect and open communication between the chair and administrator will enable effective management of the department.

Take care of yourself

Make a professional development plan for yourself. Include finding time for your research. Attend workshops to learn about your new areas of responsibility and how to better manage interpersonal issues with faculty. ■

Adapted from:

Leaming, Deryl R. (1998). **Academic Leadership**. Bolton, Massachusetts: Anker Publishing Company, Inc.

Seven Habits of Successful Chairpersons

1. **Successful chairpersons have goals.**
2. **Successful chairpersons get to know their colleagues and fellow administrators.**
3. **Successful chairpersons are agents of change.**
4. **Successful chairpersons understand and appreciate teaching, research and public service.**
5. **Successful chairpersons are honest, forthright, decent people.**
6. **Successful chairpersons are fair and evenhanded.**
7. **Successful chairpersons are consensus builders and good communicators.**

From:

Leaming, Deryl R. (1998) **Academic Leadership**. Bolton, Massachusetts: Anker Publishing Company, Inc.

Chair Resources

American Council on Education: Department Chair Online Resource Center
www.acenet.edu/resources/chairs/

Policy & Procedure Documents

Academic Personnel Manual (APM)

<http://www.ucop.edu/acadadv/acadpers/apm/welcome.html>

Appointment & Promotion of Department Chairs - APM 245

<http://www.ucop.edu/acadadv/acadpers/apm/apm-245.pdf>

Faculty Code of Conduct

<http://www.ucop.edu/acadadv/acadpers/apm/apm-015.pdf>

UC Policies Links

<http://www.ucop.edu/ogc/policies.html>

UC PPSM - Personnel Policies for Staff Members

http://atyourservice.ucop.edu/employees/policies_employee_labor_relations/personnel_policies/index.html