

Becoming a Department Chair: To Be or Not To Be

"While you were a faculty member, you probably had at least one colleague whom you were in the habit of avoiding. As chair, you cannot continue such conduct. You are obligated to maintain the same standards of fairness and professionalism toward every member of the department, regardless of your personal preferences."

Tomorrow's Professor Msg.#741 Becoming a Department Chair: To Be or Not To Be

Folks:

The posting below looks at **becoming a department chair**. It contains the executive summary and an excerpt on the need to restructure one's relationships when **becoming a department chair**, from *Becoming a Department Chair: To Be or Not To Be?*, by Irene W. D. Hecht in the monthly series *Effective Practices for Academic Leaders*. The series is available in an electronic publication that can be networked on a campus system to enable everyone on a campus to access the briefings at their desks when needed, for use both as guidance for administrators and as a development materials for faculty and others. The electronic license allows individual copying without need for permission, thus the individual briefings lend themselves to use in workshops and seminars. For online subscription information go to: Volume 1, No.3, March, 2006. Copyright © 2006, Stylus Publishing, LLC. Reprinted with permission.

Regards,

Rick Reis

reis@stanford.edu

UP NEXT: Fostering Student Learning and Success through First-Year Programs

Tomorrow's Academia

----- 1,736 words -----

Becoming a Department Chair: To Be or Not To Be

By Irene W. D. Hecht

Executive Summary

This briefing is an exploration of the path an individual might take in deciding to become a department chair. It gives advice concerning the challenges, rewards, and strategies for success and survival to prospective chairs (and their deans). It discusses some basics about the job, and the motivation expressed by chairs as they undertake this responsibility. It asks: "Do you really want this job?" and explores that issue through a series of questions. It also looks at steps to take once you have said, "yes."

Introduction

Department chairs often take up their responsibilities with a sense of obligation. However, even in such cases-perhaps even more urgently in such circumstances-prospective chairs should give careful

consideration to the nature of the work they will be taking on. The thoughts shared here derive from twelve years of work with the American Council on Education (ACE) Department Leadership Program. This paper is the distillation of insights gained from department chairs over informal "breakfast conversations" and "table topic" lunch meetings and through questionnaires used at each workshop.

Excerpt:

Restructuring One's Human Relationships

While you may expect to meet new challenges in terms of tasks and time management as a new chair, the transformation of human relationships can be a shock. These redefinitions include the following:

- o Relationships with colleagues
- o Relationships with students
- o Relationships with staff
- o Relationships with the dean's office
- o Professional relationships beyond the department
- o Personal relationships

Relationships with Colleagues

Comments by enrollees in the ACE national workshops for department chairs reveal that for some chairs changes in attitude, particularly on the part of their colleagues, comes as a cruel blow. The jokes about "going to the dark side" are hard to brush aside when behind the humor you sense a seriousness of intent. It is not funny to be thought of as something akin to a traitor at the very moment you have accepted complex responsibilities from the noblest of motives. To add to your misery, you may find that conversation with your colleagues has become more formal. You may not feel welcome at the Friday night wine bar or tavern stop. To your astonishment, you may start knowing sides of your colleagues of which you were unaware, as they come to you with requests and complaints that they expect you to tend to-with the solutions they want. Some will even try to pressure or maneuver you to become a party (on their side, to be sure) to quarrels that in the past you have ignored.

It is important to keep in mind that your professional conduct toward your colleagues may also need to change.

While you were a faculty member, you probably had at least one colleague whom you were in the habit of avoiding. As chair, you cannot continue such conduct. You are obligated to maintain the same standards of fairness and professionalism toward every member of the department, regardless of your personal preferences. That does not mean you tolerate unacceptable, disruptive behavior, or that you turn a blind eye to the neglect of professional duties. It does mean that every colleague deserves an objective hearing and courteous responses. If a colleague needs to hear a tough message, it must be delivered without personal invective or humiliating scorn.

Dealing with your departmental friends may pose an even greater challenge. A chair who is perceived as playing favorites sows dissension in the department. The result over time will be a dysfunctional group of colleagues. Once you realize that you need to re-align your attitudes and behaviors toward your colleagues, you can begin to see their "cold shoulder" as a normal-and desirable-realignment of relationships that serves your interests as you strive to create, preserve, or enhance your department's quality.

Relationships with Students

In all likelihood you will continue to teach. You will have your undergraduate majors or graduate students whom you are seeing through to the completion of their studies. You may have enjoyed an open-door policy, whereby students dropped by at will for a chat. As chair you will find that precious spontaneity curtailed.

Meanwhile, you will find yourself the arbiter over requests for exceptions from departmental requirements. It is you whom students will seek out with their complaints. When those concern the conduct of your colleagues, you can quickly find yourself dealing with awkward problems you wish had never arrived at your door. Remember whenever you are listening to a compelling narrative that there are always at least two sides to any story.

Do your best to concentrate on listening and asking questions without giving any sign of agreement with a complainant's presentation. Hunt down facts mercilessly. If you believe the complaining student can take appropriate steps to solve the problem, direct him or her to do so. Insist upon a report on the results. If the issue is beyond the student's ability to rectify, state clearly the investigative steps you will take, and set a time for the student to return. A good motto is "Don't let real problems fester, but do not permit yourself to be run in circles by trivia." One of the keys to success is sniffing out the difference between the two.

Relationships with Staff

Department Staff.

In a small department, staff relationships may initially involve only a department secretary. In larger departments, staff may include several secretaries and fiscal, communications, technology, human resources, or student services professionals, some or all of whom may report directly to the chair. The importance of a well-grounded relationship and the obligations of a chair toward a department staff person have already been discussed.

University Staff.

However, with the expansion of the chair-universe, you may well have interactions with many other university staff. There are the building janitors; the institution's maintenance staff; campus security; and office personnel throughout the campus. At every point at which your department is dependent on others for services, there will be a person with whom you need to establish an effective working relationship. Keep in mind that everyone wants to take pride in what he or she does, and you can contribute to that sense of pride by recognizing what is being accomplished on your department's behalf.

With a sense of respect established, your department will fare much better when it needs special assistance.

There are also all the college or university offices—from admissions, to finance, to the registrar, to the dean and provost and president—on whom your department either depends or from whom it receives requests for support. In the process of expanding your horizons, it is wise to gain at least a basic understanding of the responsibilities and timetables that govern the work of the other branches of the institution on which your department depends for support and to establish relationships with the people in those offices. It is far easier to work out accommodations if you are willing to understand the demands others are required to meet.

The Relationship with the Dean

One of the most important figures in a chair's expanded universe is the dean to whom he or she reports. This is a special relationship deserving focused attention. Seek to know something about who your dean is and what expectations the dean has for you. What has been the historic relationship between your department and the dean's office? If your department and the dean have been at odds, how might you resolve existing issues? If your goal is to change the relationship between department and dean, think carefully about how that might be done.

It is also important to gauge how this dean likes to work. What is your desired ideal? Do you want to "run your own show," keeping the dean apprised of your plans, decisions, and actions, but functioning autonomously? Or are you a chair who hopes to create a mentee relationship with the dean?

Seek to find out your dean's preferences. Deans are as harried as chairs, and yours may not have the margin to function as a sounding board or mentor. If you need a mentor and your dean is not willing/able to fill that need, be sure to find another source of advice. What you can usually count on is that the dean wants to be kept informed of your department's activities and problems in the interests of not being blindsided or shown up as not "knowing what is going on." Do not be surprised if your dean prefers that you present recommended solutions simultaneously with a problem you bring to her or his attention.

Professional Relationships beyond the Department

In parallel with the expansion of your universe there is an expansion-and transformation-of human relations and connections beyond the department. You may find yourself with many new stimulating and personally satisfying professional connections. But keep in mind that these professional connections are held together by the glue of your mutual responsibilities. If the professional identity of either of you changes, the relationship may rapidly fade. Be prepared to distinguish between a true personal friendship connection and a professional friendship, and do not take offense if changes in circumstances or responsibility sever what was a professional friendship.

Personal Relationships

It can be unsettling to find that while your professional universe enlarges, your personal universe is in danger of shrinking. There can be a sense of exhilaration from the new associations, but they cannot substitute for personal friendship. In fact, you may need to give most particular attention to nurturing your personal network at the very moment when your human contacts are multiplying. A safe human space where you can "let down your hair" is a common need. For those with managerial responsibilities, it is crucially important. New chairs may need to consciously redesign such personal human space.

You may, in fact, need two categories of friends. It is helpful to have at least one professional friend with whom you can safely air your irritations, frustrations, and bafflement as a department chair. A sympathetic interlocutor who will challenge your inspirations and visions is invaluable. The other category of friends is for those who are not entwined in your professional universe. Spouses and "significant others" often fill that role. Do not dilute their ability to nurture you by recruiting them to be your professional sounding boards. That should not imply a taboo on talking about work; it does mean that you want to be sure that your friend and family conversations are not overwhelmed by your work world.