

Advice for Future Department Chairs

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Tomorrow's Professor Msg #826 Advice for Future Department Chairs

Folks:

The posting below has some excellent advice for new, and existing, department chairs. It is by Jeffrey L. Buller, dean of the Wilkes Honors College at Florida Atlantic University [jbuller@fau.edu] The article appeared in *The Department Chair: A Resource for Academic Administrators*, Spring, 2006, Vol. 16, No. For further information on how to subscribe, as well as pricing and discount information, please contact, Sandy Quade, Account Manager, John Wiley & Sons, Phone: (203) 643-8066 (squadepe@wiley.com). or see: <http://www.josseybass.com/WileyCDA/WileyTitle/productCd-DCH.html>

Regards,

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Tomorrow's Academia

----- 1,706 words -----

Advice for Future Department Chairs

People become department chairs for any number of reasons, but regardless of the avenues that bring them to the position, there are bound to be questions about how to prepare, what qualities to develop, and what knowledge to gain. No one can be completely prepared for the challenges of the chair position because it is impossible to perfectly predict the situations that will arise. Nevertheless, the following suggestions provide some general advice to keep in mind whether you are actively seeking the position or you are appointed to it.

Learn the Technical Operation of Your Institution

You probably have a good understanding of how curriculum proposals are approved, budgets are set, disputes are negotiated, and searches are approved within your department. (If you don't, stop reading and go find out now. This knowledge is essential.) But how do these processes work outside your department? For example, which office-in fact, which specific person in which office-is contacted when the roof is leaking? Aside from recording students' schedules and grades, what are the responsibilities of

the registrar's office? Who ensures that commencement runs smoothly? If an alumnus needs to have a diploma replaced, how do you handle this request? If you wish to change the number of credits required for a major in your discipline, which bodies must approve your proposal and when does it become official? As chair, you will daily be asked questions about the way your department functions and the operational processes of your institution as a whole. Knowing this information will make you more effective.

Develop Conflict Management and Resolution Skills

No matter how collegial your department may be, the occasional dispute will arise. If your institution offers training in dispute mediation, register for it. If this type of training is not available at your institution, local community colleges or continuing education programs frequently offer it. If neither of these options is available, read a book devoted to this topic. Learn in advance what approaches are most likely to lead to a satisfactory resolution of the conflict. Once an issue flairs up at a department meeting or is dropped in your lap, it's usually too late to start developing the skills you need to address it.

Balance Your Administrative Duties With Your Remaining Workload

Some faculty view the chair position as a "career killer": The job takes time away from the research and course improvement needed for promotion, and it holds a high probability of alienating other faculty members when tough decisions are made, yet promises only a low probability of "making friends and influencing people." These concerns should be carefully considered, but their reality is less frightening. For every example of a career suffering even modestly because of service as chair, there are dozens of examples of people who are able to successfully balance administration, teaching, and research and whose willingness to make difficult decisions gained them the respect of their peers. Be reasonable about your workload and plan accordingly. Talk to your dean to see if you can gain a better sense of how the demands of the position might affect your schedule. Perhaps you can negotiate an additional course release in order to keep an important scholarly project on track, make arrangements to team-teach a course, or receive additional graduate support for your research project. Most senior administrators have confronted the same question of balancing priorities, and you will discover that there is far more understanding and support than you may realize. Be candid with your dean about your fears. You will likely receive advice on how to handle difficult situations, and you will gain a clearer sense of how well you'll be supported by upper administration.

Become Familiar With Parliamentary Procedure

Parliamentary procedure will help you negotiate the complexities of the committee structure on your campus, allow you to be more effective in amending or tabling motions when necessary, and place you in a position where your issues are more likely to help shape your institution's agenda. In the heat of a particularly intense debate, claims are often made that parliamentary procedure requires this or that. Since most faculty have only a general sense of whether the claim may be true, decisions can be made that could have been more effectively challenged or debated. Use available resources to acquire expertise in the basics of conducting meetings and the priority of various types of motions.

Pick Your Battles

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to focus their attention on a few important improvements than to try to do too much. After your term as chair is over your legacy is likely to be only one or two significant achievements any-way. Do those well and you will have made the best contribution possible.

Expand Your View

As chair, you will need to advocate for and view matters from the entire purview of your discipline. At the very least, you will need to start thinking of yourself as a psychologist rather than as a clinical psychologist, a historian rather than as a U.S. historian, a physicist rather than as a solid state physicist. Consider issues from the perspective of your entire college, institution, or university system. It can sometimes be better to forgo a more immediate desire for the benefit of a longer-term need. Every department and institution is different, but in general you'll benefit most by making decisions based on what you believe is right than on what you believe is expedient. Postponing the creation of a new department line to increase staffing in admissions or the development office could alter the financial chemistry of your institution so that there are more new lines in the future. Allowing a new position to be added in another department may serve your majors better than staffing a new position in your own department. Like a chess player, an effective department chair must view the entire board to see how an individual move affects every other. You will be a far better advocate for your discipline if you understand how it fits into the overall needs of students, faculty, and other university constituents.

It's Not Personal

If you've ever had the privilege of directing students in a play or taking them on an extended trip abroad, you're well aware of the phenomenon of suddenly becoming the lightning rod for others' discontent. The wise director or program leader knows this is going to happen and doesn't take it personally. Somehow, this lesson, so easily learned in situations involving students, is harder to recall when we're dealing with faculty. The psychology that occurs during long, intense work with any group will occur when you're serving as department chair. One or more faculty members may sometimes treat you coldly, and you'll be convinced that they're upset with something you did or said. Only later will you discover that the cause of their apparent rudeness had nothing at all to do with you. On other days, faculty will blame you for everything that is going wrong, even if you had no control over the situation. Don't let this common occurrence distract you from what you need to do and want to accomplish. As chair, you will occasionally be the object of frustration and animosity simply because these emotions require some outlet. Remember that all that anger is really directed at the chair itself, not at you as a person.

Find a Mentor

Every new chair can benefit from occasional conversations with someone who has gone through the same experiences and who knows how the system works. If your institution does not provide you with a formal mentor, take the initiative to find your own. Choose a chair or former chair in a department that is similar to yours in size, mission, or focus. It is generally best that your mentor not be a former chair of your department. Such an individual, while wanting in most cases to be helpful, is likely still to be involved (at least tangentially) in department politics and anything you say could be used against you. Former chairs of your department will inevitably have an agenda and their own way of doing things; your goal is to discover the way that works best for you, not to adopt what worked well for someone else. Your mentor will provide you with advice and counsel, but it is up to you to decide whether to follow that advice.

Find a Confidante

Find someone you can talk to, even vent to, when necessary. Having a person to whom you can turn when you need to voice your frustrations is not the same as having a mentor. Mentors provide advice; confidantes lend an ear. A good confidante is someone you can talk to freely without worrying that it's going to get back to your faculty or upper administration. For this reason, the person you choose as an outlet for your deepest concerns and annoyances should never be a member of your current institution. The further away from your institution this person is, the better. Everyone needs someone to vent to now and then, but do so wisely and only when it is absolutely necessary. No one likes to feel that every time they hear from someone it is about a new complaint. Moreover, even the things you say in the greatest confidence could be repeated to the wrong people. Use your confidante carefully, and cherish a good one who comes your way.

Gain Experience From Every Opportunity

If there is time before you begin your term as department chair, seek out opportunities to serve on as many department committees as possible. Heading a committee can help you hone your organizational skills. Serving on a committee headed by someone else exposes you to different models of leadership. Each committee you work with will educate you about another aspect of your department and how it works. Serving on college- or institution-wide committees can also expand your contact with the individuals and offices that can help you do your job better when you're chair. Volunteering for search committees outside your area can be particularly productive: You'll improve the skills needed to implement searches yourself, and you'll have an opportunity to ask candidates about methods used to solve particular problems at the institutions where they're currently working or studying. All committee work, no matter how dreary or routine, will provide you with at least some new insights or perspectives. Don't lose the chance to take full advantage of these opportunities.