THE CHRONICLE
of Higher Education

Back to Search Results

ADVICE

Your To-Do List as Chair

Here are the five core responsibilities you will face in leading your department

Kevin Van Aelst for The Chronicle

By Rob Jenkins | JULY 10, 2016

The job of leading a department can differ greatly from one college to the next, and even from one department to the next on the same campus.

Some chairs are more like assistant deans — their jobs include fund raising as well as departmental oversight, and they teach very little, if at all. Other chairs are merely first among equals — meaning they continue to teach but may be granted some release time from classroom obligations to handle scheduling and other administrative tasks. Some chairs play a major role in hiring and evaluating faculty, while others do little more than manage the paperwork. Some oversee huge budgets, with a great deal of say in how the money is spent, even as others struggle to find a few dollars for dry-erase markers.

Regardless of the job description, however, if you're thinking about becoming department chair you will have to fulfill at least five core functions to be effective. Some readers might argue there are more than five. But having worked at seven different colleges and served as a department head at two of them, I have identified these five as the most universal and the most important of a chair's responsibilities.

Advocate for faculty. Chairs occupy a unique and sometimes ambiguous position between the administration and the faculty. To add even more ambiguity, many chairs aspire to reach the upper levels of administration, while others view the position as a temporary tour of duty and look forward to returning to the classroom full-time.

If you fall in the former group, it's natural to think of yourself as primarily an administrator and to therefore embrace the party line on issues where the faculty and the administration might be at odds. But that is generally a mistake. In my experience, the most effective department leaders see themselves as faculty first and administrators second. Their primary role, as they see it, is to advocate for their department — for its programs and especially for its inhabitants.

Of course, faculty members are not always right, and the department's needs don't always supersede those of other departments or the college as a whole. Good chairs understand that and are prepared to make principled compromises where necessary. But a chair who is not seen, first and foremost, as the department's advocate with higher-ups will likely have a tumultuous and perhaps brief reign.

Represent the administration. It sounds contradictory but the fact is: Department chairs *are* administrators, even if they occupy the lowest tier. There will be times when you have to present some policy or decision to the faculty, on behalf of the administration, knowing it will not be well-received. In many cases, you will not be thrilled with the latest edict either.

In a perfect academic world, with shared governance, faculty will already have been involved in the decision-making process, so the chair won't be put in such an awkward position. But that ideal is hardly ever realized, and as chair, you will often find yourself charged with "selling" something to the faculty that you aren't entirely sold on yourself.

I've heard people say that chairs have a duty to get on board and support the administration, even if that means faking enthusiasm for some odious pronouncement. I disagree. I think it's fine for a chair to say, in essence: "Look, I don't agree with this either, but I don't have any more say about it than you do. We'll just have to make the best of a bad situation." That sort of candor generally earns the respect of the faculty (if not of the deans and the provost) and enhances the chair's effectiveness within the department. Your faculty members will appreciate knowing you are on their side, even if you are similarly powerless. At least you're powerless together.

In such difficult situations, you will have to use your powers of persuasion to help faculty accept and adapt to the new reality and to prevent morale from plummeting. You must strive to appear as positive and optimistic as possible: "This may seem bad, but we'll figure out a way to deal with it together." And you must be creative in identifying ways to respond to the new mandate without inconveniencing faculty or disrupting the work of the department any more than necessary.

Build consensus. As chair, you will have very little control over whether your institution as a whole embraces shared governance. But typically, you will have a great deal of influence within your own sphere. You can employ the principles of shared governance within your department, regardless of what anyone else at the institution is doing.

That means, first of all, enfranchising all members of the department, including assistant professors, non-tenure-track faculty, and adjunct instructors. It means making sure the committee structure within the department exists not just to perform the necessary "scut work," like selecting textbooks and making adjustments to the curriculum, but also to serve as a vehicle for shared governance. It means ensuring that those committees are as inclusive as possible, with everyone who has a stake having a seat (or at least a representative) at the table. It means listening to those groups and taking their conclusions and recommendations into account. And it means seeking departmental consensus on any decision that will affect the entire department.

Provide a forum. Speaking of inclusivity, one of your most important roles as chair is to create a "safe place" where faculty members who feel that their voice is not being heard can speak out freely. That certainly includes adjuncts and other contingent faculty, who may feel — with good reason — that the only place they can be heard is at the department level. But it might also include tenured professors who feel totally disenfranchised at the institutional level — again, perhaps with good reason — and who rely on the department as a forum for offering their ideas (good and bad), expressing valid concerns, or just venting.

That forum might take the form of a departmental meeting. You should probably consider holding regular meetings whether you want to or not. When I was a chair, I didn't like meetings (I still don't) and was inclined to cancel or postpone them if I didn't think there was anything particularly important to talk about. I quickly learned, however, that just because I didn't think certain topics were important didn't mean others in the department had the same perception. Faculty members, even though they might not like meetings either, nevertheless need them occasionally. That might be the only place they have to raise an issue they are concerned about.

In addition to scheduling regular department meetings, you should also maintain an open-door policy, allowing faculty members to drop by at their convenience to talk about whatever is on their minds. Keep in mind: Their convenience isn't always convenient for you. As chair, your job exists primarily to serve faculty.

I've known chairs who closed their office doors for a couple hours each day so they could get some work done, but I've never believed in that. If I was in my office, my door was always open. (Of course, I was known on occasion to tell my administrative assistant I had a meeting, then sneak off to the library to slog through paperwork in some remote alcove.)

The end result of all this listening might be just that — simply listening, providing a sympathetic ear. Chairs can't necessarily do anything about the issues that concern faculty, especially when those issues are above your pay grade. But often you can take steps to make department life a little easier for faculty, and sometimes you can take their concerns to the people above you and push for change. Occasionally you might even be successful, particularly if you band together with other like-minded chairs.

And if just listening is the best you can do — well, at least faculty members will feel like they're being heard by someone, and that's often better than nothing.

Provide vision. This is the crucial one. Over the years I've been amazed to observe that — no matter how independent-minded individual department members might be — the department as a whole tends to take its cue from the chair. A chair who is generally positive fosters optimism among faculty, whereas one who is negative generates pessimism.

Beyond that, you are responsible for imbuing faculty with a feeling of shared purpose and an understanding of their individual and collective roles. It's up to you and your department's faculty whether you want to draft a formal "vision statement." I've always thought of vision as something more abstract — implicitly understood rather than explicitly spelled out. But I know that some prefer to spell it out.

If your department does wish to create a mission statement, here are some important questions for the group to consider:

- What are our core beliefs and values?
- What are our most important functions?
- What do we want this department to be known for?
- How do we accomplish that?
- What are our professional standards and expectations?
- How do we fit into, and complement, the larger institution?

Note: That last one is especially important, as your department's vision must mesh — or at least not entirely conflict with — that of the institution.

Many have observed that the department chair's job is probably the hardest in all of higher education, caught perpetually between administration and faculty, neither fully one nor fully the other. I've certainly experienced that in my career. But it is also the most personally rewarding job I've ever held, in that I felt I had the opportunity to make a positive difference in people's lives, both faculty members and students, every single day.

Despite its inherent difficulties, the job becomes more manageable once you understand why, mundane tasks aside, you're there. And that is, ultimately, to serve faculty, students, and the institution — in that order.

Rob Jenkins is an associate professor of English at Georgia State University Perimeter College. His latest book is Welcome to My Classroom. He writes monthly for our community-college column and blogs for Vitae. The opinions expressed here are his own and not necessarily those of his employer.

You can follow Rob on Twitter @HigherEdSpeak.

'Should I Be the Next Chair?'

By Elizabeth A. Lehfeldt

That's not the only question you should be asking as you consider taking on an administrative role.

Copyright © 2016 The Chronicle of Higher Education