In early 2007, our faculty elected the two of us as co-chairs of the Department of Art at Pacific Lutheran University. As we both were fresh out of graduate school and only had three years combined service, we agreed to tackle this endeavor as a team. The outgoing chair had been in the position for 16 years, and dare we say, jubilant to pass on the responsibilities. There was an expectation to completely redesign the department’s curriculum within a year and a half, which we were aware of going into the position. Other than that, we were innocently unaware of what the day-to-day responsibilities entailed. Later this proved to be a major issue, but we had one significant advantage going for us as tenure-track faculty straight out of graduate school: We didn’t know any better!

Our experience chairing the department has been significantly demanding of our time and energy. Researching programs and national accrediting standards; making plans; casting vision; managing people, budgets, and schedules; advising; putting out fires; and the like are extremely difficult to balance with teaching and scholarly production. The benefit of co-chairing is, at its core, half the work. However, having a second pair of eyes and ears has created a dynamic environment that benefits faculty, staff, students, and ourselves. Sharing the chair position has provided us with an opportunity to support each other in the decisions we make as we recreate a department that has seen four retirements and replacements of a seven-member faculty over the last three years.

Our roles have been divided into two areas: long-term strategic planning and daily operations. Our first semester as co-chairs found JP on paternity leave and working primarily from home. It was necessary for him to take the position of planning while Spencer maintained the daily operations of the department. The following semester, our roles changed, which provided us with an opportunity to contribute where the other left off.

Our positions, however, are not always clear-cut, and sometimes we intermix responsibilities based on availability. Regarding reviews, we do complete reports and reviews for the department and of nontenured faculty, but tenured faculty are reviewed by the dean. Also, we have to this point split two course releases per year (one each in alternating semesters) and a small monetary stipend.

Many department chairs, administrators, and even accreditors have been intrigued with the chair model we employ. Our belief is that it is effective and beneficial because of the friendship we share. We trust each other, communicate and listen to each other, and are dedicated to the same goals. We understand each
other’s strengths, and share expectations of our program. Our disagreements tend not to be about outcomes, but rather approaches we would take, and in public we represent a united front. We cannot vouch for this model based solely on collegial relations, but the benefits we reap from sharing duties and responsibilities allows us to be creative and effective in our role as co-chairs.

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