As a new department chair, you may be considering how to improve your department in ways that will distinguish it, academically, from other departments. Eventually, your attention will include the physical surroundings—the facility. A short discussion with your colleagues concerning facility issues, followed by an inspection of the physical space, will help you create a summary of facility needs. This summary will form the basis for discussion with a facility services professional.

MAINTENANCE VS. IMPROVEMENT

While creating a summary of facility conditions, it is helpful to consider the difference between facility maintenance and a significant facility improvement. Facility maintenance includes tasks such as custodial service, window cleaning, lamp replacement, painting, carpet and tile repair, carpentry and roof repair, door and lock adjustments, plumbing and electrical repair, servicing of HVAC control systems, grounds maintenance, pest control, and testing of fire alarms and fire suppression systems. In general, these tasks are related to maintaining facility components in a condition that enables the reliable provision of services for which the facilities were originally intended. Minor upgrades to mechanical systems and safety devices are sometimes categorized as maintenance. These tasks are typically planned and funded through an annual facility operations budget.

Significant facility improvement includes renovation of existing space, adaptation of existing space for a new purpose, and construction of additional areas. Often, these tasks are characterized by a combination of complexity and cost. Cost parameters vary among institutions, but a task that costs $300 is likely to be categorized as facility maintenance (funded from an annual operations budget in a facilities department), while a task that costs $75,000 is likely to be categorized as a significant facility improvement (planned and funded as a capital expenditure). If you are envisioning a significant facility improvement, ask about the established procedure for creating a project proposal and generate a written summary of your discussion that includes proposed solutions.

Ask about maintenance schedules. If your department resides in an older building, maintenance at even the highest levels will not provide the amenities that exist in newer buildings designed for
current needs and desires. Discuss your observations and concerns. Solutions to many problems may be as simple as informing the facilities representative to initiate corrective action. Correction of other problems may require scheduling and budgeting.

**FUNDING SOURCES**

We have already established that the annual operating budget will cover facility maintenance tasks. As a chair, you need to know which budget will cover your maintenance needs: your department budget or the institution's facilities budget. In some cases, monies might even come from the central administration budget. Before a project of modest maintenance proportions can begin, physical plant services will want clarity on cost coverage, a task that falls to you as the department chair.

If your department's project falls under the "improvement" category, you will need a long lead time to organize such a project. This may require separate fund raising. Or it may require negotiations when formulating the institutional budget for the next fiscal year. In any case, improvement projects will involve you directly—in conversations both within and beyond your department.

Perplexing are the projects for which discussions often arise concerning the funding source for a service that is not easily categorized as facility maintenance or a significant facility improvement. These projects may include modifications of existing building components to support departmental equipment, a new electrical supply for a high-temperature oven, repair of departmental equipment that is not integral to the building system, an electronic balance, and maintenance of a scene, model, or electronics shop operated by a department to support departmental programs that are generally not part of a facilities budget. Be prepared to negotiate—both with the physical plant department and with your dean or provost—as to when your department must cover these kinds of costs.

Similar issues arise in the case of installation costs for departmental equipment. When installing new equipment or replacing existing equipment, your department must satisfy operational parameters of the equipment and current building code requirements. Electrical, water, sewer, computer network, makeup air supply, exhaust venting, HVAC, space, safety, and building structural requirements are considerations. If your department has planned thoughtfully, provision for installation costs will have been budgeted in the original equipment proposal or grant application.

**PERFORMING A FACILITIES INVENTORY**

Contact the person in charge of facilities to schedule time for a tour of your department area and a discussion of maintenance issues in your department. Refer to your prepared summary of concerns as
you survey your department area. Open doors and observe the contents, use, and physical condition of each space. Does your department have special needs that the institution has not adequately addressed? Have you noticed that other departments at your institution or at other institutions are experiencing a greater frequency and quality of maintenance than your department?

As a department chair, you must carefully monitor safety concerns. What are the inspection frequencies for fire suppression systems and alarms? How often does the fire inspector visit your facility to observe fire and life-safety conditions, and who accompanies the inspector on these trips? Science (chemical and radioactive material), art (paint and film development chemicals), and athletic departments (paint and pool chemicals) often store, use, and generate a waste stream that may be regulated by statute (for example, perhaps they are considered a hazardous waste stream). Is the storage location and security appropriate to the material? How does the institution monitor the waste stream? Are required documents present and updated at appropriate intervals to satisfy federal, state, and local requirements? What should you do if an accessibility issue related to the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) arises?

**WORKING WITH THE PHYSICAL FACILITIES DEPARTMENT**

Most facilities maintenance departments have a process for providing service that is not part of a preventive maintenance schedule. This often consists of a work order or service request system. Some systems accept requests through an e-mail or web-based process, which employs an electronic system of acknowledgment and scheduling, while others rely upon written requests transmitted by mail. Become familiar with your system. Where possible, it is helpful to assign one person in your department to collect, transmit, and act as a point of contact with the facilities department. It is always tempting to transmit the need for a particular service by speaking with someone in the facilities department during a conversation concerning another subject. With the exception of an emergency situation, do not consider this to be a reliable transmission of information that will result in a completed task, especially if a formal means exists. When you initiate a request for service through an established, documented process, you and your facilities department can track the task to ensure timely completion.

If you anticipate significant facility improvements, request additional information defining the process. Obtain a copy of current strategic planning materials for your campus describing current and future development (a "master plan" may be one such document). Pay particular attention to planned future use of the building that you occupy and the planned future location of your department (perhaps in a new or renovated building) with associated timelines. If the future location of your department is
not evident, ask for clarification before proceeding further. The result of clarification will significantly affect the course of your planning efforts.

**WORKING WITH YOUR DEPARTMENT ON FACILITY PLANNING**

It is essential that you lead a series of discussions with department members concerning the facility planning documents and future curricular goals as they pertain to space planning. Rarely does a department feel that the institution has allocated adequate space to accomplish its goals. Compare your department with departments at other schools—schools that you feel have adequate space to support the needs of a quality curriculum. Your facilities department can assist. Consider your department as it currently exists and the department's vision for the next five years, 15 years, and 30 years. This information will form the basis for your department's planning document. Arrange a meeting to discuss your department's goals with your dean, vice president, and/or provost. If you achieve agreement on your department's goals and space needs, you will be much more likely to obtain approval for additional study by on-staff facility planners or for funding to hire an external planning group.

In planning for a new building or major renovation of your existing building, your role as department chair is that of an advocate for your department's current and future space needs based on an acknowledged academic program. The planning work that you have completed to this point will support your efforts as you work with on-staff planners and architectural firms. This planning work also will assist you in justifying expenditure of funds for projects such as moving walls, adding doors, creating student research space, renovating laboratories, building new laboratories, or exchanging common-use space for additional faculty office space within your department. Your facilities department can assist you in developing your projects. Facility improvements that are consistent with acknowledged department goals and that conform to currently accepted cost-benefit ratios, planning documents, and standards of construction have a higher probability of getting approved and funded than other non-safety-related improvements.

Adequate time is required to properly design spaces, attain project approval, identify funding (some of which may be generated through your efforts in obtaining grants), award bids, and complete construction. Length of time to complete these tasks may vary from nine months to one year for a simple project requiring a capital expenditure (such as office, laboratory, and equipment requirements essential to the success of new faculty). Ensure that your department meets the specified submission deadlines for projects. Missing a deadline may delay consideration of a project until the next cycle of the process. More complex projects may require more time. Project durations can be compressed, but time compression may result in lower building quality, higher cost, and greater disruption of core campus programs while construction occurs.
Providing a high-quality learning and working environment for faculty, staff, and students in a timely manner is a sensitive, ongoing issue. Consulting your facilities department as needs change is an effective method for minimizing surprises.