Arizona State University (ASU), in conjunction with its Academic Chairs and Directors Council, is developing a model of academic leadership that allows departmental heads to foster quality among department chairs. The academic leadership model recognizes the gray area that chairs inhabit, between faculty and administration, and offers strategies by which chairs can move their departments forward within the context of ASU’s mission and goals. This institutional commitment to the professional development of its first-line administrators is derived from President Michael M. Crow’s vision of the new American university.

As the 2003–04 academic year began, we realized that our internal discussions could benefit from examining models and practices in other institutions. We decided to experiment by sending a team of experienced chairs to the American Council on Education (ACE) Chairing the Academic Department workshop. Our goals were (1) to bring back good ideas that were expressed at the workshop, and (2) to evaluate the usefulness of the workshop for future attendance by ASU chairs. Happily, we realized both goals.

The two-day workshop in San Diego in February 2004 allowed chairs of departments from all three ASU campuses to share common problems and learn together. The format of the meetings provided both structured sessions on such important topics as budgeting, interpersonal conflict management, and the evaluation of teaching, and time for team members to discuss what they had learned and how it could be useful for ASU departments. We talked about how our various departments evaluated faculty, how they set budgets, and what resources were available for help in managing conflict. Further, the ASU group was able to network with colleagues from other universities in an interactive learning environment.

Coffee breaks, lunches, and dinners were opportunities to share ideas that had been suggested by the workshop format and content. We were careful not to sit together, but to mingle and actively exchange ideas with colleagues from other universities. Then we joined up to put our information into the context of the ASU experience.

When we returned to ASU after the workshop, we met with our administration to discuss the experience. One of the ideas that came out of the conference was the value of bringing speakers to our
campus to address two areas that we identified for further development: conflict management and the use of teaching portfolios.

We identified the campus's need for work on conflict management because we recognized that chairs spend a disproportionate amount of time on that issue within their units. And we see teaching portfolios as a means of correcting what we regard as a lack of uniformity in evaluation. At present, we have as many methods for evaluating faculty teaching, research, and service as we have departments. Bringing chairs together around a common method should help us focus on the process, in hopes of bringing some standardization and methodology to what sometimes appears to be a chaotic or highly diverse event. The dialogue alone will be useful in bringing out ideas and learning about what each unit is doing so that best practices may be shared.

In addition to these specific and concrete results from ASU's attendance at the ACE chairs workshop, our intention is to continue the dialogue, both internally and externally, about the qualities and skills that a strong academic leader must have. Thanks to our participation in the ACE workshop, this discussion will be more expansive and, undoubtedly, more effective.