Much has been written about the new responsibilities of department leadership and how changes in expectations, performance, and accountability in higher education will affect the work of those who head academic units. In addition, the worldwide economic crisis has posed significant new challenges within our departments through staff and budget reductions that are, at some public institutions, accompanied by increased enrollments and education costs. Looking past the obvious short-term modifications that fiscal restriction will impose, one might predict that higher education’s need to change and adapt will accelerate. We may well see a massive restructuring of our institutions that will become permanent. Such transformations will have dramatic effects at the department level and create different agendas, adding new burdens to department leaders and faculty. These pressures can cause department chairs to lose sight of the basic operating principles that will be essential for future leadership success. Our purpose here is to provide reminders to existing and potential department leaders to be attentive to the critical elements of their position that impact their preparation for leading and their effectiveness in doing this important chair work.

**Personal Credibility**
A primary attribute of an effective chair is personal credibility. Although an incoming chair may be known for this trait (an internal candidate) or assumed to possess it (an external hire), this presumed credibility is ephemeral and must be converted to an earned form. Honest and candid interactions with internal and external constituents are key to preserving personal credibility. Not only will this be important in everyday dealings with the faculty and the dean, it will also be key to establishing external partnerships and collaborations where commitments of support and cooperation will be necessary ingredients. It should be displayed in presentations to external constituencies and other stakeholders to gain support and cooperation. In many ways the chair’s credibility and the overall reputation of the academic department are inseparable.

**Effective Communication**
Chairs must be effective communicators. As conduits of vital information between the faculty and the administration, chairs must deliver all news with credible rationales, contexts, and justifications. Although it is reasonable to express concern regarding the wisdom of some policies and suggestions, chairs should present the entire story with accuracy and from a perspective that does not undermine their effectiveness with department colleagues or senior administration. Mechanisms for communication are varied and include discussions at faculty meetings, agendas or announcements sent electronically or in hard copy, impromptu conversations, newsletters, press releases, or websites. Chairs may communicate with a variety of individuals on campus and off, but the most essential communicants are department personnel and the dean.
Framing Critical Issues
Chairs will inevitably face controversial and culturally challenging decisions that will affect the lives of others at the institution. Great care must be taken when framing critical issues to properly represent the impact and consequences and how they advance the institution and its mission. An inadequate or muddled context can lead to the failure of an important initiative due to a lack of sufficient forethought, planning, or wide support. Framing allows one to see the initiative through the eyes of all stakeholders and identify who might be favored and who might be threatened by the change. The chair’s role may be viewed not only as a department advocate but also as an advocate for the greater institutional mission properly and effectively framed. Working to ensure the latter or to modify the proposal to lessen the negative effects can minimize resistance and smooth the path to success. Anticipating the source of resistance through framing allows the change agent to align strategic political support and assemble relevant and compelling data. Chairs must recognize that change is difficult for most people and seeing prospective change through the eyes of all stakeholders beforehand is a powerful asset in the quest for a successful outcome. The essence of effective framing is talented leadership.

Supporting Department Success
Chairs must be effective departmental supporters and champions. Faculty, staff, and student successes should be celebrated at every opportunity. Institutions may vary in their missions and goals but it is important to publicly cite faculty and staff for teaching excellence, winning new external funding, noteworthy publications, awards of various types, community engagement successes, efforts on behalf of students, and course and curriculum development. Chairs can disseminate accomplishments through the communication outlets mentioned earlier and by the nomination of faculty and staff for awards both local and beyond. Similarly, student success can be recognized in many of the same ways, especially when in concert with a model faculty mentor. Finally, there are achievements in academic units that are the collective accomplishments of the entire department. A record number of graduates, an excellent year in recruiting new majors, and an unprecedented number of graduates entering graduate and professional schools may be examples of overall unit success. It is important that the chair recognize and applaud these outcomes to keep faculty and staff focused and rewarded for good work on things that really matter.

Continuous Unit Improvement
It is essential that departments have goals for improvement and effectiveness. For example, a goal might be to increase annual external funding or the number of undergraduate majors. Although these may be appropriate goals, it is not likely either will increase every year. In times of reduced budgets, lower faculty counts, or delayed faculty hiring, some of these standard goals may be impossible to reach for several consecutive years. But even during such times it is important that the chair commit to continuous unit improvement even if the area chosen is not among the top goals of the unit. This is necessary to maintain positive momentum and support strong morale. Even in the worst of fiscal times improvement can be achieved through simple things like developing an online advising template for undergraduate students or offering a summer refresher course for K–12 teachers. Such projects can get the attention of the administration who may remember, at a future time when there are resources to invest, the unit nevertheless forged ahead during difficult circumstances.
External Visibility
As we enter an era of accelerated change or institutional evolution, chairs must develop an active external visibility. Effective chairs can no longer work exclusively within their units. In recent years collaborative arrangements and interdisciplinary academic and research programs have become prominent entities on many campuses. Department chairs are key players in establishing such arrangements because they frequently involve faculty work considerations, shared costs, monetary flow in the form of tuition and grant overhead, and the commitment of equipment and facilities. If the monumental change implied at the outset of this article comes to pass, chairs will be involved in negotiating and implementing major adjustments due to program and unit dissolution, mergers, and unit rearrangements, with the latter two possibly crossing traditional school and college boundaries. Many of these changes will overcome existing departmental cultures and be laid at the chair’s doorstep. Experience in leading effectively across campus and in developing major change will be increasingly important for department chairs.

Future Progress
Another essential for chairing in the coming years is being aware of what is on the horizon. Typically, chairs know their departments well and have a good sense of what is happening in their schools. Looking to the campus level, the vision becomes foggy for many. Events and policies (accreditation, reform, accountability) playing out at the national level are virtually unknown to all but a few faculty members and chairs. This cannot continue. Being informed early of what is on the way allows the department to have input into local policy, prepare faculty and staff, choose the best solution for the unit, and be first in line for resources by preparing a sound plan for implementation. Chairs must be attuned to emerging policy before it reaches their campuses by staying in touch with numerous national publications and academic leadership websites.

Delegation
Workload issues for chairs have become increasingly irregular, unpredictable, and largely ad hoc. There are frantic, full days that end with nothing crossed off the to-do list. Then there are teaching requirements, scholarly expectations, management functions, and new initiatives all on the agenda. Most chairs must delegate the increasing administrative expectations that require prioritization of tasks. In some cases administrative work can be assigned to bring a faculty member to one hundred percent workload while in other cases a faculty member will step forward to volunteer for the overall good of the unit. For those faculty who wish to pursue an administrative track, an appointment as assistant or associate chair, with defined and high-impact responsibilities (not just stand-in and routine roles), is a good model for delegation and administrative development.

Professional Development
It is widely recognized that administrative responsibilities impede chair progress and productivity in teaching and scholarship. Those contemplating becoming a chair might consider negotiating a time for scholarship or a “package” (similar to that offered new faculty) that allows for the continuation of scholarly work through a hired surrogate. This might be the case in a research-intensive institution and may involve hiring a senior laboratory and center manager or a special assistant to keep scholarly programs viable. Another way to keep current
in teaching or research is by establishing collaborations with teaching faculty at the forefront of pedagogy or productive research colleagues.

**Next Steps**

Chairs should plan when they wish to leave the chair role and what they would like to do next. Although the time of departure isn’t always up to the chair, there are usually warnings if things are not going well. Returning to the faculty role may require retooling in teaching or research. If the chair has served five years or longer, perhaps an in-house sabbatical would be appropriate. In other cases a modest “re-start-up package” might be more appropriate. Although some may object, this investment is justified by what the individual has sacrificed through years of service and by the potential unit benefits of returning someone to full productivity. If the next step is up the administrative ladder then the preparation is different. Here the chair’s leadership accomplishments will be critical and should be documented in detail. The philosophy behind the chair’s leadership style should also be carefully thought out and articulated.

**Conclusion**

There may be other essentials to serving as effective department leaders during the turbulent times ahead, and chairs and would-be chairs will gain much from the input of existing and former chairs, savvy administrators, and external sources of guidance. Our hope is that these suggestions will offer a starting point and lead to a productive and rewarding role as chair.

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Email: nlees@iupui.edu, dmalik@iun.edu, gvemuri@iupui.edu