

Chairing the Fine and Applied Arts Department

Seamus Reilly, now Vice President for Institutional Advancement at Parkland College, served as Chair of its Fine and Applied Arts Department for two years. Parkland College is a comprehensive community college located in Champaign, Illinois. Written specifically for the ACE Department Chair Online Resource Center, 2008.

It is not rare for a member of the faculty to move into an administrative position. It is less common for a professor of English and Critical Studies to become the chair of the Fine and Applied Arts Department. In fall 2005, though, at the suggestion of a colleague in the department, that is exactly what I did. Since I was already a tenured faculty member in English and Critical Studies, the idea had never occurred to me. Now, thinking about applying for the vacant chair position in Fine and Applied Arts, I decided to meet all of the full-time faculty and staff in the department and talk to them. They were unanimous in one regard. They all said, “The first thing that you must know is that we are different.” This seemed obvious to someone from another department, and indeed, the same opinion was voiced throughout the rest of the college. So I began to explore the nature of this difference and to try to understand what it meant.

The Fine and Applied Arts Department at Parkland College houses art, music, theatre, mass communication, speech communication, graphic design, an art gallery, a radio station, and a 300-seat theatre. In addition to faculty, there are full-time staff positions in the gallery, radio station, and theatre. The single common theme in all of these areas is the idea of performance and public outreach. In many ways, this is no different from the role of any academic department that serves the needs of students, the institution, and even the community through service learning or other grant-related initiatives. What sets this department apart is the fact that many of the faculty are active, working artists in addition to being teachers. In many regards, this is in keeping with an ideal sense of what it means to be a teacher. To modify Shaw’s dictum: “Those who can, do *and* teach.”

Understanding and representing these important differences was one of the most challenging and rewarding parts of being the chair of the department. Active artists often invest huge amounts of time in their students, frequently beyond what takes place in the classroom. Also, since much of the work done in the classroom is intensely personal, teachers must dedicate time to prepare and nurture students. In addition to the teaching load, faculty members are heavily involved in creating their own work or preparing performance schedules for the coming year.

The presence of working artists in the department benefits the institution in many ways. First, they are living examples to students, demonstrating what is involved in being practitioners of their art. Second, they bring credit to the institution. Often the general public’s only contact with the institution is through the outreach programs provided by fine and applied arts programs. Third, they often attract students who are already established professionals in the community and are interested in maintaining their interests in art,

theatre, and music. Many of the faculty and administrators from the local university are active participants in our band, theatre, and art courses.

In a time when fine and applied arts funding has been eviscerated at the high school level, it is frequently incumbent upon the department chair to underscore the importance of these programs to the administration. Luckily, the quality of the productions, concerts, and gallery shows serve as examples of the value of arts in the college. Unlike most faculty at community colleges, active artists often have a regional and national exhibition and performance agenda, which can provide valuable publicity for the institution. Additionally, these contacts at the local, regional, and national level allow students to be introduced to artists who come to show work and do demonstrations.

Chairing the Fine and Applied Arts Department was very different from being an English professor, but the experience was invigorating. By changing both my home department and my position within it, I gained a new perspective on the role of the institution and education, which—in its infinite variety—is an expression of utmost creativity.

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