The Fashion Institute of Technology (FIT), a SUNY campus in New York City, has gradually grown from a technical college into a diverse, comprehensive institution. It now has a double focus (art and design, and business and technology), while maintaining close ties with a cluster of industries and high job placement rates for graduates. In recent years, however, digitalization and globalization have pushed the rate and scope of change to the point that a major adjustment is underway, not just of FIT’s programs, but also of our understanding of the institution’s mission and identity. The impact of the changes is felt throughout the college, but nowhere more forcefully than in the offices of department chairs.

The biggest change has been a shift in emphasis from two-year to four-year programs, which is driven by industry’s needs: (1) for greater knowledge/mastery of technology, especially in the design fields, and (2) for our graduates to become managers, coordinating the outsourced operations that they used to oversee at a more local level. The new emphasis on more demanding four-year programs has changed the demographics of FIT admissions and required us to strengthen our School of Liberal Arts to meet the increased expectations of graduates. Faculty development has been shaped by new technology and curricula, a new emphasis on communication and critical thinking skills, and adjusting pedagogy for an evolving student body with different cultural backgrounds, skill sets, and educational experiences.

To keep up, the college has adopted new technology; expanded its administration, hiring more faculty for new programs; and undertaken major building and renovation projects. As a result, however, operating budgets are stretched thin. And this is taking place in a time of decreased state and city funding. The financial pinch exacerbates the problem of a low full-time to adjunct faculty ratio—there are fewer full-time faculty, but more work.

Enter the department chair, whose primary responsibility is simply to keep the program running, by scheduling courses, hiring faculty (especially the many adjunct faculty), resolving student issues during registration and student complaints later in the semester, and, of course, managing conflict. The extra stresses of the institution in transition, arising from resources being stretched thinner just when extra work needs to be done, add to this already busy workload of the department and its chair.

My own experience has been in liberal arts departments: FIT’s Department of English and Speech, and its Health and Physical Education Department. English and speech faces a push for a higher standard of writing and speaking across the college and for new assessment activities, some rather clumsily mandated by SUNY. Meeting these goals will involve not only extensive work on curriculum and
pedagogy within the department, but also significant outreach and coordination with other liberal arts departments and with the Schools of Art & Design and Business & Technology. New and expanded programs require new courses—creative writing for graduate illustration students, for example, or a history/literature hybrid to give students options for fulfilling SUNY’s American history requirement.

Meanwhile, as little money exists for new full-time hiring, English and speech faculty are recruited for work outside the department—to run an honors program, to become an acting assistant dean, to create and implement new models of assessment. Fewer full-time faculty remain for the committee work, to create courses, or even to teach. Hiring more adjunct faculty means more peer observations and other evaluations in a semiannual rehiring process, as well as more supervision and faculty development simply to maintain programs, let alone extending and improving efforts in composition, oral communication, literature, or the study of film.

In the Health and Physical Education Department, the problem is simpler and yet more profound: Will re-examining the roll of the School of Liberal Arts mean eliminating the department? Who knows, but the chair is the one who must walk through a minefield of faculty paranoia, space negotiations with Student Life, water welling up through a gym floor one day, and the total number of full-time faculty in the department being reduced to two. In the transitional environment, lower-priority programs and their needs are pushed even further to the margin.

I could add pages of detail, but the general picture would not change. A transitional period can become a time of crisis for department chairs, because chairs are asked to do more with less, manage increasing demands in the present even while trying to envisage, and begin the spadework for an improved future. Transitions are necessary, though, and FIT is facing its transition optimistically and proactively through a major college-wide strategic planning initiative. The campus is in fact prospering, growing, and energized with exciting new life.