



Department Chair Online Resource Center

Words of Advice from Chairs and Deans

The following are suggestions made by chairs who have enrolled in American Council on Education workshops for department/division chairs since November 1999. The comments are divided into the following categories:

1. Chairs appointed from within an institution.
2. Chairs appointed from outside the institution.
3. Deans.

Submissions are identified by institutional type.

1. Advice from Chairs Appointed from Within an Institution

Private Liberal Arts

Institution 1:

1. Focus on issues, not personalities.
2. Take time to chat informally with individual faculty in your department as often as possible. What are their concerns? What is working well? How can you support them better? Can you help with any problems?
3. Remember to compliment individual faculty when appropriate. I found my (too few?) comments were appreciated.
4. Network informally with colleagues.
5. Be attentive to the needs of new untenured faculty—be supportive.

Institution 2:

The surprising thing is how little you know about how the institution works and how your colleagues have functioned within it after all the years you've been there. I should have had the conversation I had this summer (after a year on the job) with the provost well before I even considered accepting the position. I asked him (and he responded candidly) what his vision was for the college in the next five to 10 years, how he saw my department contributing to those objectives, how I could facilitate the process, what (who and where) he thought the trouble spots were. Nothing he said was terribly shocking, but it was reassuring to know I hadn't misjudged the situation and that he knew what I was up against.

Institution 3:

There is no single word of advice that I can give to a new department head. Each person's circumstances are different. However, I do offer the following suggestions:

1. Communicate effectively with your department. Make sure each member understands the reason for your actions.
2. Maintain a line of communication with your dean. Make sure that your dean understands the needs of your department.
3. Make sure that each member of the department understands the expectations placed upon them and is annually apprised of whether they are meeting the expectations.
4. Be equitable in doling out resources.
5. Be fair in dealing with other departments.

Institution 4:

Request a timeline for the year: date for completing the course schedule for the next semester, deadline for catalog submissions, etc. I found myself heading into the unknown and the timeline helped me a lot. *Expectations:* What is expected of the chair in the coming year in terms of reports? Did the outgoing chair fail to turn in reports that then fall to the new chair?

Files: Go through the mass of files that you receive and arrange them to suit your own style of organizing your world. I inherited files with no visible organization. In addition, the files contained considerable materials not needed. The streamlining process enabled me to get a handle on what I actually needed to know.

Assessment: Far and away the most monumental and most daunting task involved assessment. Be sure, as new department chair, that you quickly become familiar with two documents: the departmental assessment report for the preceding year and the departmental assessment plan for the current year. You will be expected to produce one of each by the end of your first year in office.

Institution 5:

Know your deadlines. Most administrators assume that department chairs know reporting deadlines for schedules, budget requests, faculty evaluations, etc. A new chair should ascertain at the beginning of his or her first year the various reporting deadlines. Otherwise, the dean sends out a reminder one week before the deadline and the chair has to scramble to assemble the necessary information. Giving yourself plenty of time to generate a strong report is advantageous to the department and reduces stress.

Be an advocate and mentor for your faculty. A new chair should have a conversation with every member of the department. What does each faculty member want, professionally? What obstacles may be in his or her way? How can the chair best help the faculty member achieve his/her goals? If your

faculty sense your empathy for their needs and your willingness to advocate for them, they will be supportive when you are the bearer of bad news from above.

Strike a workable balance between the dual roles of faculty advocate and administrator. Too many deans and provosts don't have enough understanding of the department chair's dual role. It is very difficult for a chair to serve as both advocate and mentor, on the one hand, and evaluator on the other. Additionally, how does a chair know when to push for departmental needs and when those needs must be subsumed to a greater institutional need? Retaining the confidence of both your faculty and the administration is akin to walking a tightrope.

Public Liberal Arts and Teachers Colleges

Institution 1:

I've chaired from both inside and outside. I was hired from the outside to be department head at James Madison University in 1987. I had previously been elected chair from within the English Department at University "X," where I was also selected from within to direct Women's Studies. (I expect that most chairs hired from outside the institution have had some sort of administrative experience to qualify for the position.) There certainly are important differences. When coming to the position from the inside, you are more likely to know where the landmines are buried, but it is much more difficult to resist making hasty changes and to overcome past dynamics that you've been a part of creating. Chairing from inside can be heartbreaking, coming from the outside is just frustrating.

Institution 2:

Lessons from a New Chair:

1. Practice saying "No!"
2. Be available when you say you will be available.
3. Have a "front" person schedule all appointments and have that person give a brief description of what the individual(s) will be discussing.
4. Absolutely do not let anyone or anything interfere with having lunch alone or with others of your choosing. No lunch committee meetings.
5. Listen, listen, listen. Then speak!
6. Delegate the "small stuff."

Institution 3:

Two things come to mind immediately (because I failed to do them—with disastrous results):

1. Do not make changes of any sort in your first year as chair. Do not revise the curriculum. Do not change the contract for the copier. Do not move people into different classrooms. Do not replace the fluorescent lights with full-spectrum bulbs. Do not hire anyone, if at all possible.
2. It does not matter how simple, how necessary, or how obvious an improvement you are contemplating or, more likely, requesting to make. Particularly if you are hired from the outside, but even if you're not, you have no idea of the complex maze of agreements, gripes, and feuds that have led things to be as they are. Wait a year before you do anything. Wait a year before you have an opinion on anything. Request that all actions be postponed until you have a better sense of the needs of the department. Make sure that everyone (especially your dean) knows this will be your plan before you even accept the position. Consult everyone before you do anything, and after you have taken action of any sort, be sure to tell everyone involved, no matter how tangentially, what has been done. In the end, this will take a lot less time than explaining and defending will take.

State Comprehensive

Institution 1:

I think a tip worth sharing is how naive I was as a new chair about the administrative process at the upper levels. I was welcomed by the administration as a part of the team, yet I quickly learned that the greatest threat to my department was the administrative team. It seems natural to me now, but at the time it was a shock. As the administration strives to run the university efficiently, my department's allocation of resources is frequently questioned. It needs constant justification and defense. Just because our success may seem good for the university, the administrative team may not support our efforts simply because it is not in line with their bigger picture. As a department chair, I quickly learned that I was stuck in the middle between my faculty and department needs, and this bigger picture concept by the administrative team.

Institution 2:

I learned early that when you write a memo, ask yourself, "What does the person want to hear?" That is not to say that you should lie to someone or tell them what they want to hear, but to tell them only the facts they want and word it in a way that they want the information conveyed. An example would be the difference between a report on a meeting you attended that has implications for your faculty and for the university. Your report to the faculty should have all the details, but the provost would like a brief summary.

Institution 3:

Two comments that, while they seem obvious, may be helpful:

1. Personnel issues: Personnel issues are always the most difficult ones for any administrator. These are as individual as the person and cannot be addressed “in general.” Work your way through these issues one at a time and seek any information you can through readings, workshops, etc.
2. Resources: One of the most important tasks a chair has to do is to make resources available for faculty, staff, students, etc. To be able to do this, begin your role with an immediate crash course in all your accounts and how to read the details of the accounting system. Learn the paper trails for all processing.

Second, learn to do development work to find funds for resources needed that are never going to be forthcoming within the allocation system of the university. Budgeting and development work are often overlooked and undervalued as being essential to the workings of the unit.

Two Year College Public

One of the many insights I gained from the ACE workshop was the fact that all department chairs face many of the same challenges in their positions, regardless of whether they are at a small community college or a large research university. As department chair, you are in the one position at any college or university that has the most direct influence over what goes on in the classroom. As a result, you have the opportunity to extend your influence beyond your own instruction. You will also have many opportunities to practice your interpersonal skills with faculty in your department, students, and the administration. The position can be immensely rewarding. The one piece of advice I would give a new department chair is to include in their professional development activities those aspects associated with their added responsibilities.

2. Advice from Chairs Appointed from Outside the Institution

Public Liberal Arts and Teachers Colleges

I’ve chaired from both inside and outside. I was hired from the outside to be department head at University “Y” in 1987. I had previously been elected chair from within the English Department at University “X,” where I also was selected from within to direct Women’s Studies. (I expect that most chairs hired from outside the institution have had some sort of administrative experience to qualify from the position.) There certainly are important differences. When coming to the position from the inside, you are more likely to know where the landmines are buried, but it is much more difficult to resist making hasty changes and to overcome past dynamics that you’ve been a part of creating. Chairing from inside can be heartbreaking; coming from the outside is just frustrating.

Private Roman Catholic

I am both an old and a new chair: chair for six years at one university, then moved to my new position one year ago. One very important factor in chair success is orientation. The contrast between my two institutions is very strong in this regard. I recommend that the outgoing chair continue to be assigned and paid during a designated orientation period, such as the summer (if it's not a nine-month contract) or the first three months of the fall semester, in order to provide the necessary background, procedures, introductions, and the like.

State Comprehensive

There is a substantial difference between heads from within and those who come from outside of a system, but probably neither should assume that they will be told everything that they need to know or do in order to succeed. In some ways perhaps there is just no substitute for trial by fire, but knowing in advance that you will need to ask a lot of questions and consult widely to get various perspectives might be helpful.

3. Advice from Deans

Public Liberal Arts

Resist the impulse to respond to every problem as it comes up. Take time to plan, organize files, work on larger issues. Use your staff to protect you from the constant stream of faculty and students who are inclined to drop in every other minute to ask you to solve their problems. Do make time for them, of course, but having regular meetings with each faculty and office hours for students will insulate you from the barrage of complaints, requests, and crises that constantly arise. In fact, many crises will resolve themselves with a little time! And, of course, be sure to delegate and not try to personally fix everything.

If I could identify the one biggest mistake I made in my first year, it would be trying to solve every little issue that arose, working longer and longer hours to catch up. Looking back I can see that I wasted a lot of energy because I was afraid to say, "Could we discuss this at our meeting later this week?" The department chair must balance the day-to-day "tactical" demands with the long-range "strategic" demands. I became overwhelmed with the tactical and frustrated that I could not get to the strategic issues, which is where I felt I could really contribute to the program. I know now that the daily crises never go away so you might as well allocate a percentage of time and energy to them and another percentage to the conceptual, planning issues. Keeping that balance will lead to more effective work for the department and more satisfaction in doing the job.

State Comprehensive

Institution 1:

From a dean's perspective, the best advice to give to chairs is to be honest about what they need to know, be accurate in writing up reports and submit them on time. From a humanistic perspective, guide the faculty with soul, allowing the personal and professional elements to blend into a holistic leadership.

Institution 2:

The challenges that face every new department chair differ widely. The only certain thing is that there will be challenges. Develop a vision for the future of the department with an agenda that supports that vision. Then, repeatedly test that agenda, informally, with everyone in sight. Listen to what they say. Refine, adjust, and build evidence to support the picture that emerges. Avoid announcing your ideas for the first time in public. Try to avoid surprising the members of your department. When you discover resistance to changes that must be made, back off. Try to understand the foundations for the disagreement. Reshape your position with supporting information. Test your vision again. Push forward only when you know there is consensus.

Institution 3:

The real authority you have as a chairperson does not reside in your title but in how you lead. Treat all people with respect, even those who might not seem to merit it. Listen and learn; be open to the ideas you hear, and understand the opinions colleagues express to you. But don't be overly credulous. React (calmly) when people have bad ideas or curious notions, gently pointing out the illogic and working to shape better action.

Another part of learning is asking for advice—from colleague chairs, from your dean, from senior colleagues who are living repositories of departmental history and mores, and especially from secretaries, whose trust you need to cultivate and whose practical knowledge of intra- and extra-departmental matters can be as invaluable as it is encyclopedic.

Develop priorities, and create strategies for realizing those priorities. For colleagues to cooperate in pursuing the goals you're attempting to achieve, they must buy in to those goals, and that means that you must guide their actions and help shape their views. Within the department, junior colleagues will need your mentoring, and you will need the cooperation of senior colleagues. Earn it through the right actions and appropriately high expectations. Be candid; few things are so corrosive as duplicity or out-and-out prevarication.

And, extending that point, realize that you have serious responsibilities up and down the administrative chain. Outside the department, aggressively but honestly pursue your department's highest priority needs with your dean and with your development office and donors. While some chairs succeed in developing a following within their departments by vilifying the views of central administrators or misrepresenting the views of their deans, this is not a strategy that will serve anyone well in the long run. You need to have your faculty and your dean as allies if your unit is to progress. Consistency, discernment, and truth-telling are keys to forging this alliance.

Institution 4:

Start as soon as possible to understand that the attitudes, activities, and skills of an excellent faculty member are not isomorphic with those of an excellent administrator. They are not conflicting, nor are they identical, and they may seem foreign and perhaps even hostile at times. It will be natural to resist embracing many of these new bureaucratic duties. If you find them completely repulsive, go back to the faculty as soon as possible. If you see some dim glimmer of rationality or utility in them, you may become comfortable wearing the partial mantle of administration.