The Essentials for New Department Chairs

Edited by
Carolyn Allard

The **Department Chair**
TOOLKIT

The Essentials for New Department Chairs

Edited by Carolyn Allard

Jossey-Bass books and products are available through most bookstores. To contact Jossey-Bass directly call our Customer Care Department within the U.S. at 800-956-7739, outside the U.S. at 317-572-3986, or fax 317-572-4002.

Jossey-Bass also publishes its books in a variety of electronic formats. Some content that appears in print may not be available in electronic books.

Contents

Introduction

As a new department chair, you face many challenges—chief among them that you likely received little or no formal training in academic leadership. You may feel that you face these challenges alone, but in fact a wealth of information and time-tested techniques have been collected over the years from experienced academic administrators. For the first time, this booklet brings together some of the best guidance and strategies that have appeared in *The Department Chair*, resulting in a collection that is highly relevant to a new chair's work. The advice contained in these pages can help you build the skills necessary to successfully lead your department. This booklet is full of practical advice that can be put to use immediately, and each article is concisely written so you won't have to spend valuable time searching for a solution or technique. Whether you're looking for information on how to work more effectively with your dean, how to better manage your time, how to conduct successful department meetings, or how to best facilitate change, this booklet will help—it covers all these topics and more, from the basics to the specifics.

This booklet is structured to provide guidance in four critical areas: chair as leader, getting started, managing conflict, and helping faculty and students thrive. The articles were selected to provide you with timely, comprehensive information. They detail effective practice and represent the best, most innovative thinking on topics and situations you will regularly encounter. This essential resource will become your personal guide as you navigate the responsibilities of your new role as department chair.

Chair as Leader

Learning to Lead

by Anne V. Massaro

A new department chair recently emailed me in response to a "welcome" message I sent him. In that email he said, "There will be no shortage of things to learn. I just have to figure out where to start!" I believe these two statements reflect what most new chairs feel and experience—an appreciation that the learning curve will be steep, and a curiosity about what to learn first, second, and third. This particular chair was promoted from within his own department. Faculty who assume departmental leadership roles at a new university have even greater challenges.

The most profound issues faculty face when moving into the chair role include:

- Building relationships with department faculty and staff, other department chairs, and the dean
- Understanding others' expectations
- Comprehending the current culture, structure, and governance mechanisms
- Learning how to get things done
- Grasping the administrative tasks associated with the role, such as scheduling and budgeting

Given these challenges, and more, there are cognitive shifts and behavioral strategies that can help a new academic leader transition smoothly and reach a level of productivity in a fairly quick time frame. Transitioning, learning, and listening should be the primary responsibilities for the new chair's first month. With the right support mechanisms in place, and an intentional focus on learning from the start, a new chair should consider using the three-month mark as a time to begin actively leading.

Shifting Thinking

Integrating new practices into one's daily routine is difficult; many require shifts in thinking and doing. Some may require a more passive stance than faculty are accustomed to. As noted by Danielson and Schulte (2007), new department chairs who documented their journey from faculty member to chair, "We had to learn how to listen as well as how to make ourselves heard. We needed to get the faculty and staff members involved in our decisions, and the best way to do that was to ask them for their input and listen to them before acting" (p. 79). What is described by these two new chairs is a shift from autonomous decision making to collective decision making and an emphasis on listening and asking questions, rather than telling and doing.

Intellectually, the shifts just described sound simple and based on common sense. In reality, it takes commitment and purposeful action to change behavior, especially behaviors that have become unconscious habits and that serve faculty well. A fair amount of teaching is predicated on being the expert with the answers. A significant portion of research is independent thinking and writing. Although these behaviors lead to success as a faculty member, they can lead to failure for a department chair. For anyone who has an accomplished history, it is challenging to fully understand that past actions resulting in past successes may not create successes in the future. It is imperative for new chairs to adjust from thinking and acting independently to an emphasis on involving others and focusing on the collective.

Building Relationships

Meeting with department faculty and staff is a must for new chairs. Depending on the size of the department this task alone can be a big time commitment, but it is critically important because of the chair's responsibility to lead the department with a shared vision and to create a plan that leverages individual strengths. While faculty who are promoted from within their own departments will have a tendency to believe they know their peers and relationships are already established, the criticality of one-on-one meetings remains. A relationship as peers has been previously established. A new relationship must be invented, one characterized by mutual respect, an understanding of what motivates and drives both parties, a commitment to asking for input, and a belief that suggestions (once expressed) will be heard. In general, faculty tend to be skeptical that "administration" cares about them or wants to hear their ideas. In addition, faculty peers don't typically discuss the future direction of the department or wrestle with how individual interests add to the discipline as a whole. Reducing skepticism and inviting this kind of inquiry will lay a solid foundation for shared direction and mutual respect between the new chair and each of his or her faculty members.

When planning one-on-one meetings with faculty, a new chair might consider framing the conversation around three categories: perceptions, strengths, and priorities. Asking the following questions will communicate that the new chair cares about each individual and the department in totality:

- What is your perception of our department?
- What strengths do you bring to what we are about and the students we are here to serve?
- What are your priorities for the next year?
- What departmental priorities do you believe are most important for our advancement and academic excellence?

Meeting one on one with the dean should be another high priority for the new chair. Understanding the dean's style and preferences

and obtaining information about the dean's direction for the college are reasons to make this a priority. Is the dean someone who expects to know an abundance of details, or is a high-level, big-picture perspective sufficient? What are the meetings the dean leads and what are the expectations for pre-meeting preparation? These are questions related to the dean's style. A new chair can adjust and accommodate if preferences are understood.

The dean's vision for the future of the college, and the chair's department in particular, will influence the department goals the new chair sets. In some cases the dean will have very specific expectations for the chair's department. The more explicit these expectations are, the more likely the chair can meet them. Lastly, the dean should be a source of information about the university. If major initiatives or changes are planned, it is in the new chair's best interests to learn about these early and understand how they will affect his or her department and faculty.

It has been suggested that the new chair meet with department faculty and staff as well as the dean. There may well be additional stakeholders the new chair will want to meet with in the first three to six months. Reflecting on departmental priorities and functions, the new chair should consider making a list of additional stakeholders and deliberately planning conversations with each person or group on the list over the course of six months.

Understanding Culture, Structure, and Governance

There are exact and inexact ways to discern the department's current culture, structure, and governance mechanisms. Both approaches are recommended. The easiest and most tangible way to learn about how decisions are made, and by whom, is to carefully review the existing pattern of administration for the department. This document should describe the department's committee structure, faculty meetings, key processes, and communication patterns. It is as important to understand what is not written as it is to comprehend what is written. This is the imprecise, or intuitive, way of learning. For example, one department chair perceived

a deep lack of trust between the faculty and the previous chair given the length, infinite detail, and depth of description in the current pattern of administration for her new department. Having this insight helped the chair gain credibility and carefully approach process changes.

Learning Administrative Tasks

Learning the administrative and technical aspects of the chair's role can occur in three ways. Many universities offer workshops and online tutorials related to budgeting, hiring, and evaluating. New chairs who take advantage of these opportunities gain new knowledge and, more importantly, learn about campus resources. If these types of structured learning opportunities are not available to new chairs, seeking out and meeting with those who are accountable for various university processes is equally valuable. A new chair might discover the person responsible for fiscal affairs, assemble a list of questions, meet with this person to express an interest in understanding fiscal matters, and acquire from his or her point of view what a new chair needs to learn. A third option for learning about the budget and other fiscal matters is to identify a seasoned peer who is highly proficient in this area. The dean will likely be able to point the new chair in the direction of a veteran chair who has mastery in a specific area.

Reflecting with a Trusted Partner

Identifying a trusted partner is highly recommended for new department chairs. This partner might be a friend, peer, mentor, or coach. This is someone with whom the new chair can share observations, challenges, mistakes, and wonderings. In conversation with this trusted partner the new chair can be vulnerable and frustrated but feel safe in genuinely expressing him or herself. This partner should be from outside the new chair's college and have no hierarchical authority over the chair. More than title or status, the qualities of this person are paramount. The new chair should seek out someone who: