Survival Tips for New Department Chairs

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SO YOU have received an appointment as chair of the department of foreign languages! Congratulations! You are embarking on one of the most memorable experiences in your professional life. Whether these years, be they three or six or thirty-five, are ones that you will always remember or ones that you will never forget depends on you.

My twenty-four years as “The Chair” (seventeen as department chair followed by seven, so far, as humanities division chair) have provided me a considerable number of opportunities to deal with a broad range of administrative situations. As a result, I have developed some general guidelines that have served me well in my own work. I offer you a few of them, which may help you survive many years as chair without losing your sanity.

You are going to do the same thing whether or not you are having fun; you may as well enjoy the process. Attitude may not be everything, but it is well ahead of whatever is in second place. Take pleasure in the job that you do, and do your job in a spirit that indicates your pleasure. A sense of humor and a ready smile are contagious; their spread throughout your faculty can go a long way toward establishing a happy, healthy work environment.

Learn to work with the dean and others who think they run the college. The first operative term here is learn. Spend time with your deans. Determine their agendas, open and hidden. Find out their areas of responsibility, and look for ways your department can help them meet their objectives. Take the initiative, making appointments to visit with your deans on positive matters before you have your first confrontation. You will have already banked some goodwill and will be viewed as a team member rather than as an adversary. The second operative term is work. Expect to work long hours; then do so, if necessary, to meet all administrative deadlines, to complete all required paperwork, and to do your job thoroughly, so that the administration will develop an attitude of positive expectation toward you.

Take full advantage of the honeymoon period. The first few months in your new job will be a magical time of near invincibility. Make good use of this brief period when members of the administration want you to be happy (and thus steady and productive) in the position and members of the faculty are most willing to allow a few mistakes. This is the time to request new faculty positions, additional staffing, up-to-date equipment, released time for creative faculty projects, increased budgets, and even new furniture—provided, of course, that you can present a sound rationale for each, including proof of disparity among departments or campuses in your institution. During my first two years as chair of the humanities division, I was able to convince the administration that our division had not been treated fairly by the college during the tenure of the previous chair, and, as a result of my research into inequities in staffing and budgets, I procured two faculty lines from another campus, one staff position from another division, funding for a new language center, and new office and lounge furniture throughout two buildings for the department. My faculty members felt like winners because we had acquired new personnel and facilities and because their new leader was action-oriented. The administration was pleased because I had taken the initiative, assumed responsibility for some hard decisions, indicated that I was well informed about the institution, improved faculty morale, and enhanced the aesthetic quality and comfort levels of part of the campus. Two years later the same actions would probably have been interpreted as greedy, territorial, and fiscally irresponsible. So, use your first year well; you may never have the same kind of opportunity.

Create a friendly, inviting environment around you. Give your office a bit of character. Display objects that are meaningful to you, such as photos, books, samples from a favorite collection, framed prints, and travel souvenirs. Allow yourself to be seen as a thinking, feeling person rather than a machine with authority. If you have the opportunity to do some redecorating, remember that pretty colors generally cost no more than ugly ones.

Do your homework before asking questions. Keep handy your college’s master calendar and manual on policies and procedures. Create your own calendar with reminders of upcoming deadlines at appropriate intervals so you can
anticipate due dates. Use the policies and procedures document as the first reference on any issue, then ask questions freely concerning interpretation of policy. You want to appear—and to be—informed about accepted college procedures; do not ask questions for which the institution has already provided answers. Make your questions meaningful so that they will elicit thoughtful responses.

Don’t ask anyone to do anything that you haven’t done, don’t do, or aren’t willing to do. Get your own coffee, and make your share of the pots. Straighten the magazine racks and the lounge furniture, and throw out the old newspapers. Make copies of a class handout for a faculty member who is running late. Assign yourself one of the less-desirable teaching time slots from time to time. Serve occasionally on difficult, time-consuming committees.

Be the head cheerleader for your faculty members. Recognize and reward their successes. Show appreciation for their efforts. Send thank-you notes for every achievement. Praise them where it counts, especially to the administration. Support your colleagues’ academic efforts by attending their professional presentations and their students’ performances. Share the hard tasks rather than assign them. I believe that my most significant project is my monthly newsletter, addressed to my faculty and staff but also sent to every college administrator with whom we work. In this document I include brief professional news items about departmental activity for that month (publications, papers, community service, committee reports, contracts for books or exhibits, visits from representatives of other institutions); administrative reminders (grant opportunities, deadlines, percentages of budgets spent, requests for information, announcements); personal notes (birthdays, travels, births of children and grandchildren, successes of children); and upcoming dates (registration, drop deadline, performance schedules, due dates). This communication tool allows me to keep the administration informed about the activity and productivity of the language faculty and to encourage faculty members to stay professionally involved.

Surround yourself with the best and the brightest; they will make you look good. When you hire anyone—faculty members, secretaries, technical assistants, student workers, and so on—eagerly seek exceptionally strong candidates. Look for ways to staff your department with individuals who are intelligent, creative, imaginative, open-minded, and industrious. With some leadership and motivation from you, they will show you off rather than show you up.

Everybody has a strong point: identify and value those of your faculty members. You may have inherited faculty members who would not have been your first choices in hiring. They are part of your group nonetheless. Before you criticize any perceived fault or weakness in one of these colleagues, find an element of value in him or her and praise it among peers. All faculty members will show some weakness sometime, so look immediately for skills, traits, and achievements on which you can honestly compliment each of them.

*Draw people outside the department into your circles.* Include campus deans, librarians, media specialists, computer service technicians, counselors, student services directors, and chairs of other departments in your planning meetings as appropriate. Allow them to feel like valued members of your instructional team. Rather than compete for scarce financial resources, develop a network of professionals who can help you find the means to fund your projects.

You want team players? Be one. Be willing to collaborate with your colleagues in their areas of interest. Look for ways to integrate campus activities across discipline boundaries. Think openly, imaginatively, cooperatively, rather than within narrow boundaries. Color outside the lines.

*Build trust.* Tell the truth, but do so gently. All your faculty members need to be able to trust you to tell “the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth.” Only then can they be assured that they are always fully informed of their situation, good or bad. Share with professors any compliments or complaints you receive about them. Of course, bad news is more difficult to relay. Do so gently and kindly, and be willing to help devise a plan to remedy the situation, if possible. Hesitation does not help. Immediate action is almost always best.

*Be fair.* No unmerited favoritism is permissible. Avoid giving anyone cause to doubt your ability to deal with all issues objectively. Obtain and organize thorough information concerning the professional responsibilities and activities of your faculty members, and use these data to assign balanced teaching schedules, committee duties, responsibility for students and student organizations, and so on. Certainly, faculty workloads will never be equal since some individuals will take on more projects than others. However, let these differences result from faculty choices rather than from your negligence.

Expect good work from your faculty members. Your faculty and staff will be no better than you believe that they can be. Set high standards for them, then offer them the means to achieve those goals. Expect them to continue to grow professionally, then provide adequate support for their development opportunities. Expect them to incorporate appropriate technology into their classes and laboratories, then provide information about seminars, workshops, and conferences. Expect them to obtain high student assessment ratings of their teaching, then provide an evaluation system that incorporates student opinion. Expect them to seek outside funding for research and other projects, then provide access to information about possible grants. Also provide public recognition for their successes. Your faculty will want to live up to your expectations.

*Harry Truman* was right; the buck really does stop here. You must be willing to make decisions and to stand by them.
Granted, you want all the information obtainable in a reasonable period of time; granted, you want consensus among all parties involved or affected; granted, you would prefer to avoid unpleasant tasks or troublesome issues. However, the desk of the department chair is the landing place of many difficult issues that must be addressed quickly. You must decide them, frequently with incomplete information, and assume responsibility for the consequences of your choices.

Don’t walk the stairs if you can’t see your feet. In other words, do not take risks if you cannot see what results they may yield. When you are overburdened and have no way to see ahead, get help or divide the responsibilities into manageable components and tackle them one at a time. A misstep made under pressure can be difficult to correct. It often pays to take the time necessary to walk carefully.

Pick your fights judiciously. Don’t expend your energies on battles you cannot possibly win. Be open about this attitude with your faculty. If possible, go after some almost-certain successes before tackling a major problem. This tactic will allow your faculty to see you as successful and your administration to see you as prudent. A positive track record leads to positive expectations, giving you a psychological advantage in the larger struggles to follow.

Provide a regular, systematic means for faculty members to evaluate your performance as chair. Whether you choose a commercially designed assessment instrument or create one in-house, request faculty review of your abilities and actions as a leader. Conduct the first survey as a “pilot study” to test the evaluation tool and process as well as to monitor your effectiveness. Ask faculty members to study the document itself and to recommend modifications that would improve it or make it more suitable for your department, thus giving them a sense of shared ownership of the process. Then, make the exercise meaningful; actually use the results of the assessments to improve your work and to show your faculty members that you have heard and heeded their opinions. After only a few years, most faculty members will have much less need or inclination to grumble about your performance since they will know that they can express their concerns, dissatisfaction, and preferences regarding your actions. (See app. 1 for a sample document.)

Pursue your professional development as an instructional leader. Expertise in your academic field only is no longer sufficient. You must also become knowledgeable about and confident in management skills. Subscribe to and read current journals on education and academic leadership, such as the Chronicle of Higher Education, Change, Academic Leader, Administrator, and Education Week. Check the stacks in your college library for appropriate books on academic administration, such as New Directions for Higher Education and Chairing the Academic Department. (See app. 2 for a listing of recommended reading.) Take advantage of conference sessions on such topics as middle-level management in academe, budget enhancement during hard financial times, dealing effectively with difficult people, and legal changes in higher education.

Belong to a network of academic administrators. Most of the problems, situations, and issues you will encounter have been faced and dealt with before by someone somewhere. Become an active participant in organizations or groups for chairs and deans, including, if possible, a group composed of foreign language administrators, since its members will be working with similar political, philosophical, and pedagogical issues. (Obviously, we suggest the Association of Departments of Foreign Languages of the Modern Language Association as the logical first choice.) You might also join a cross-disciplinary group so that you can gain insight from different types of reasoning and strategy. Develop a few relationships that are close enough that you feel free to telephone for an occasional brainstorming session during particularly challenging times.

Money talks. Learn to talk money. Study your institution. Find out the college enrollment distributions, the student-teacher ratios in all disciplines, the cost per student-contact-hour in all disciplines, the percentages of classes staffed by full-time and adjunct faculty, the amount and kind of support staff for the faculty, and the enrollment trends in languages and other disciplines. Plot the enrollment and cost trends in your department over a period of years. Compare the amounts spent on capital outlays in departments across the college during the past few years. Get information on the anticipated college budget and expenditures for the next few years. Then develop a reasonable request for enhancement of your faculty, staff, facilities, and equipment within the parameters of your carefully researched college financial statistics.

Become computer literate. Develop sufficient expertise in the use of spreadsheet and word-processing programs to present your documents to upper levels of administration in a clean, clear format, using readable layouts and complete, detailed figures. If you do not have these skills yourself, make certain that your secretary has them or acquires them as soon as possible. The presentation is often as important as the message.

Know the law. First, read your college policies and procedures manual for your institution’s interpretation of the basics. Then, when in doubt about a specific situation, call to consult with an appropriate official before acting. Helpful sources include the academic vice president or dean (for problems with faculty members), the dean of students or director of admissions (for issues concerning students, such as grade challenges and release of information), and the director of financial aid (for information about eligibility for grants and loans). If you find yourself in serious trouble, ask your president to make an appointment for you with the college attorney. Contrary to the old adage “It’s easier to ask forgiveness than permission,” in legal matters you do not want to need forgiveness.
Keep good professional liability insurance. We live in a society and an age in which litigation seems to be on everybody’s mind. Consider the recent spate of lawsuits on educational issues; one suit, concerning a grade challenge in a state university, reached the United States Supreme Court in January 1993. Although the university was not found at fault and the grade was not changed, the legal battle cost hundreds of thousands of dollars. Usually, in a lawsuit against an educational institution, the department chair, dean, and president are included as defendants. Protect yourself from possible financial disaster with professional liability insurance. (Of course, do all you can to stay out of litigation in the first place by knowing the law and abiding by it.)

Be your own best friend. For many chairs this guideline is the hardest one to keep in mind. The constant demands and expectations of students, faculty members, administrators, professional colleagues, and the public take precedence over your own needs. You can maintain your sense of balance, your system of priorities, and your sanity by establishing a schedule for regular care of body and spirit. The groups who require your time, effort, and energy will quickly adjust to your regular time-out, whether you use it to jog, sing, read, or nap. Your rejuvenation will be worth their wait.

As chair, you will occupy the position that has the most potential to shape the academic program of your institution and, thus, to influence the college careers of the students. Enjoy this opportunity to participate meaningfully in higher education.

Appendix 1

Faculty Appraisal of Department Chair
Department of Foreign Languages

Please evaluate the performance of your department chair as an administrator, using the following scale:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Unsatisfactory</th>
<th>Satisfactory</th>
<th>Exceptional</th>
<th>Insufficient Knowledge</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
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Administrative Characteristics

1. Supports objectives of faculty and staff 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 X
2. Motivates effectively 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 X
3. Fosters positive work environment 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 X
4. Takes action when necessary 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 X
5. Assesses faculty and staff effectively 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 X
6. Encourages faculty and staff development 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 X
7. Manages budgets and funds effectively 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 X
8. Displays appropriate self-confidence 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 X
9. Handles pressure effectively 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 X
10. Maintains positive relationship with faculty and staff 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 X
11. Handles conflict effectively 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 X

General Job-Related Characteristics

1. Job knowledge 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 X
2. Judgment and problem solving 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 X
3. Time management 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 X
4. Cost consciousness and control 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 X
5. Attention to detail 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 X
6. Dependability 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 X
7. Initiative 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 X
8. Enthusiasm and attitude toward job 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 X
9. Resourcefulness and ingenuity 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 X
10. Cooperation and teamwork 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 X
11. Communication skills 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 X
12. Productivity 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 X
13. Leadership 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 X
14. Decision making 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 X

Please use the space below to provide comments on the following subjects:

Strengths

Areas for Development

Suggestions for Improving This Document

Thank you for taking the time to complete this evaluation document. Your ratings and comments will be studied and used to set goals for the upcoming academic year.

Appendix 2

Selected Recommended Reading for Department Chairs

Academic Leader
Magna Publications, Inc.
North American Headquarters
2718 Dryden Dr.
Madison, WI 53704-3086
one year (weekly): $73.00
Chairing the Academic Department
By Allan Tucker.

Change
Heldref Publications
4000 Albemarle St., NW
Washington, DC 20016
one year (monthly): $28.00

Chronicle of Higher Education
PO Box 1955
Marion, OH 43305
one year (forty-nine issues): $67.50

Managing the Foreign Language Department:
A Chairperson’s Primer
Sam L. Slick and Richard B. Klein, eds.
Valdosta State Univ.
Valdosta, GA 31698

New Directions for Higher Education
Jossey-Bass Inc.
350 Sansome St.
San Francisco, CA 94104
one year (four issues): $60.00