AᴄE Department Chair Online Resource Center

The Secrets of Successful Chairs

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Most academic chairs starting out today will find their role much more complex than they would have just a decade ago. Chairs are involved in a wide variety of tasks, including defining the strategic missions of their units, curriculum planning, performance reviews, fiscal oversight, and advocating for and representing their departments to the university at large and to external constituents. Academic chairs need skills different from those that originally attracted them to the independent life of the scholar. No one explains their new role to them, and most new chairs learn through personal experiences and by watching what other chairs do. It's enough to make any former faculty member look up from the desk on any given day and ask, "Why am I doing this?"

We were interested in how successful chairs managed the experience of being chair, what helped them to be successful, and what experiences encouraged them to pursue their work—or to run from it. We interviewed successful department chairs about their work, including their most exhilarating and their most frustrating experiences, in order to share their wisdom with you.

MOST EXHILARATING EXPERIENCES

Successful chairs told us about three kinds of experiences they found most rewarding and satisfying: Chairs find their work exhilarating when they can obtain resources for the department, implement their vision, and create a positive environment.

Chairs were most excited about successfully obtaining resources such as faculty, equipment, and financing for their department. One chair was excited when he finally recruited a prominent faculty member when previous recruiting efforts had been unsuccessful. "We hired an endowed chair position," he explained. "We had run the search once or twice before . . . without success. I heard a rumor about this guy who might be interested. I jumped on it, actively recruited this guy, and he's now joined us. And we would be up a creek if we had not gotten him. He's just a world-recognized guy. I went after him pretty aggressively and it really paid off."

Chairs also are excited when they can implement their own vision of the department. They welcomed the challenge of identifying where changes needed to be made and then moving the department in that direction. One chair advanced her department's academic vision through changing

the curriculum. "The discussion was basically to revamp the curriculum. It was exciting and we did it, really, in two years," she summarized. "We started from scratch and got it done in two years. . . . That was exciting."

Chairs report a sense of exhilaration when they create a climate that is conducive to an effective organization. One chair recalls a meeting in which she recognized that she had done this. "I think one of the most exhilarating experiences was the day when we talked about our vision and we talked about who we wanted to bring on board. . . . People have bought into wanting the very best. I think they've decided this is a good thing," she related. She also noted the concurrent benefits garnered from fostering camaraderie. "That symbolized that I had done one thing that I had set out to do, and that was to bring that group together as a community."

MOST FRUSTRATING EXPERIENCES

When we asked about frustrating experiences, chairs were loquacious. The four recurrent responses centered on frustration when chairs were thwarted from obtaining resources for their departments, when their visions were blocked, when there were unresolved conflicts, and when there were endless reports to be written.

The most frustrating experiences occurred when chairs were thwarted from obtaining necessary resources and then became exasperated when they were expected to keep departments running with few resources and little hope for additional ones. As one chair summed up, "With this particular department, it is that we're understaffed, that we don't have the faculty that we need to run the programs that we have. A simple comparison would show that we're understaffed."

Chairs were also frustrated by misleading promises of additional resources and the administrative hurdles that made obtaining these resources impossible.

When chairs attempted to be visionary, they were frustrated by others who used delaying tactics or were uncooperative. As one chair complained, "I was trying to effect change where people didn't necessarily want to change, and so I think that was frustrating. Some things got done, but basically, it took a lot more effort than I had envisioned it would."

Chairs often were surprised by the frequency of interpersonal conflicts within their departments and frustrated by their failures at mediation. One chair reported, "Our retired faculty caused great irritation with our staff. They didn't want voice mail. We have two secretaries for about 10 to 12 faculty, but we have one retired faculty member who wants a secretary to spend her time answering his phone. And it really irritates her when she's trying to do the end-of-month accounting and he gets lots of

personal calls. But . . . he's got a temper. A couple of times, we bit the bullet and went face to face with him. He almost had a heart attack screaming at us." Chairs also stated frustration trying to mentor faculty who were not receptive to feedback.

Generating endless reports is the most frustrating aspect of a chair's administrative role. Lamented one chair, "The less important things, but the things that get emphasized are management, paperwork, and gobbledygook that takes an unbelievable amount of time. It seems that every time there is a new administrator at a higher level that is trying to do something good, it results in another layer of paperwork that, if you never did it, it's not apparent it would ever matter, except you start getting nasty e-mails if you don't do it." Chairs were willing to produce reports with a purpose, but resented reports that seemed to be arbitrary demands for new information.

MAKING HEADWAY

How can a new department chair maximize exhilarating experiences and minimize frustrating ones?

Here are recommendations gathered from our interviews with successful chairs:

- If you are a new chair, seek out more experienced chairs to serve as your mentors.

- As a new chair, recognize at the outset that you know more than you think you do. Believe in yourself and your convictions.

- If you are an experienced chair, be ready to offer guidance to a new chair, recognizing that much of what you learned was acquired on the job. Understand that what you now take for granted is not common sense to someone new.

- As a new chair, recognize at the beginning that chair roles are complex. You can't be equally successful in all areas.

- Establish a "chair support group" that networks at least monthly. Often, just getting ideas from someone you trust will give you the confidence that you need to move forward.

- Understand that successful chairs involve others in their work. You can further your own desire for change in your department by supporting like-minded faculty members who, in turn, will support you.

- Take advantage of any opportunities for formal leadership training, especially feedback-intensive programs (e.g., 360-degree assessment) and activities that encourage you to share methods for solving common problems.

- Get a name stamp and a trusted associate chair to whom you can delegate routine tasks. Focus on what is most important and delegate the rest.

- Fulfilled, exhilarated chairs took time for their own research and also were more likely to mentor their faculty. Take time for yourself and your scholarly interests.