



## **Department Chair Online Resource Center**

### **Practical Tips: Getting off on the Right Foot**

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If this is your first assignment as a department chair or program head, the first year can seem overwhelming, largely because you don't know what to expect. It's easy to feel you have become the victim of others' whims. The following suggestions may help you gain a measure of control over the tasks you will face.

#### **Faculty Manual**

Be sure you have a copy of the faculty manual and know where it is whenever you may need to consult it. Give it at least a quick scan so you are familiar with its content, but carefully read any sections pertaining to faculty review.

#### **Institutional Calendar**

If your institution does not publish an annual deadline calendar, you will make your life more pleasant by creating one for yourself. If you do have an institutional calendar, review it and place all dates that pertain to your chair responsibilities onto your personal calendar. Be sure to mark your personal calendar with appropriate lead time. Noting that evaluation letters are due February 1 is not helpful if you haven't reminded yourself a week or more in advance to write those letters.

#### **Departmental Calendar**

Are there dates related to departmental business that do not appear on the master institutional calendar? If so, add these dates to your schedule for department meetings and to your personal diary. The department may have scheduled student advising sessions or the annual department picnic. There may be social events during student orientation and graduation. Make sure these dates get on your department calendar and your personal calendar.

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## **Personal Calendar**

One of the most trying aspects of the job of chair is the extent to which your responsibilities will encroach on your personal time—be it for scholarly work, class preparation, or family time. Preserve your sanity by reserving some scheduled time for those important aspects of your life. Scheduling those activities may seem contrived, but committing that time may make you feel less guilty in refusing to meet *ad hoc* demands, which can often be deferred or scheduled at a later time. Crisis management is an easy trap to fall into—if you allow every demand to become, in effect, a “crisis” to which you must respond immediately.

## **People**

Chairing is an intense “people” job. Take time to identify those in your “people universe.” Ideally, you will be able to turn to your predecessor for general guidance. If not, make an effort to find an experienced chair in a cognate department who is willing to give you some helpful tips.

Your faculty colleagues also are of crucial importance. As chair, you cannot limit your contacts to old friends. You need to care about each and every faculty member—and probably their families, as well. You will need to give some thought to how you will do that.

Then there is office staff. An experienced department secretary can make your life as chair infinitely easier. Take the time to confer with that person (and any others who work regularly in the department office) on how you can smoothly work together.

You should expect to interact with more students than you did before. Talk to your predecessor or other department chairs about the kinds of problems students may bring you.

You also are much more likely to be in contact with various university personnel, from the janitor to the admissions office staff, from the registrar to the finance officer. Identify the people you may have to ask for assistance, and take the time to meet those you do not already know.

Your dean also is an important player in your life as a department chair. An effective partnership between dean and chair makes a great difference in the operations not only of the department, but also of the institution. Even before accepting appointment as a chair, have a conversation with the dean concerning expectations on both sides.

You also need to maintain external contacts. Does your department have regular internships? Does it need to expand those? It is important to maintain cordial relations with placement locations, as well as with other external publics on which your department depends for expertise or funding.

### **Budgets**

As chair you will be responsible for the department budget. It may be fairly simple, covering modest operating expenses, or it may be highly complex, covering laboratories, student assistants, equipment, adjunct salaries, and so on. In either case, rest assured that it is not unusual for new chairs to be unfamiliar with the accounting procedures and computer reports of the institution. If orientation is not provided, take the first financial report you receive and consult with someone in the finance office to enable you to track your budget. Also ask about the "normal rhythm" for your department in order to spot danger points. While some departments expenditures are relatively steady from month to month, others have intermittent large expenditures, followed by periods of quiescence.