

Secrets to Surviving the First Year: A Chairperson's Confessions

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I have served as a department chairperson for exactly one year, six months, and six days. When hired, I had 15 years of classroom experience but had never held an administrative position within an institution. I interviewed for the chair position and was hired from outside of the university.

Accepting a leadership position at a new institution offers some unique challenges. Not only must the new hire learn about his or her new colleagues and the inner workings of the department, but he or she also must endeavor to learn the overall institutional political landscape.

GET KNOW CAMPUS STAFF AT EVERY LEVEL

My first word of advice to first-year chairpersons (FYCs) is to visit the administrative offices on campus and get to know the people who work in those offices. Not only did I familiarize myself with the university's flowchart, but I also made an effort to know the staff members as well as their supervisors. Many of the people who have the ability to supply immediate answers to questions or provide immediate assistance are not always the ones who are highly visible. Though the high-level individuals on campus do a wonderful job of representing the university, their administrative staff members handle many of the daily tasks.

I also made an effort to get to know the housekeeping crew within my building. These individuals know every crook and cranny of the building because they clean and maintain it. They have been instrumental in directing me to offices of colleagues and assisting with the game of which key fits what lock. Also, many members of the staff and housekeeping crew have served through numerous administrations, will most likely continue to do so, and understand the intricacies of what FYCs are trying to learn.

TURN TO PAST MENTORS FOR HELP

I must admit that I found my first year as chairperson on a new campus extremely challenging and I was often lonely. Although many of my chairperson colleagues at the institution offered their support and eagerly answered my questions, very few of them went out of their way to actually mentor me in my new role. I do not fault my colleagues for this. I have come to realize that they

simply did not have time to meet the constant demands of their department, perform their administrative duties, and hold the hand of a young, idealistic FYC. Therefore, my second bit of advice to FYCs is to utilize mentors from your past and your former chairpersons at other institutions.

If not for the faithful mentors from my past, all current or former chairpersons, the task of being a department chair would have seemed impossible. These individuals constantly checked in with me to monitor my progress and offer words of wisdom and support. More importantly, they allowed me the freedom to voice my fears, concerns, and frustrations within a nurturing and supportive environment. Their support has proven to me that a true mentor remains your mentor for life.

LISTEN, LISTEN, LISTEN

Third, it is imperative that an FYC take the time to listen, listen, and listen even more. I cannot overemphasize the importance of the skill of taking time to really listen to what ALL others are saying. Listening to the comments and concerns of others will yield a wealth of knowledge about the current state of the institution; the history of the department; the current direction of the department; and the hopes, dreams, and concerns of the faculty members and students.

It is not wise for a new chairperson to plot a course of direction for the department without some knowledge of the department's history or without an understanding of each faculty member's departmental concerns. If possible, the FYC should focus on learning and listening to the people he or she is now working with while making as few policy changes as possible. Of course, the FYC should make sure that the necessary tasks to keep the department functioning occur. However, I do not believe that any new policies or major changes should be introduced within the first year. Introducing sweeping new changes and innovations without examining the history of the department can result in a strained relationship between the new chairperson and the faculty for years to come.

OBSERVE EACH FACULTY MEMBER

Lastly, in addition to listening, the FYC also should spend time observing. Although the members of the department are often viewed collectively as "the faculty," remember that each person is an individual. Because these individuals are unique, they will each respond to a chairperson in a unique fashion. This point must not be overlooked.

Observe the unique behaviors of each member of the department and learn to respond to each of them in a unique fashion. These observations will help you develop a rapport with individual faculty members. For example:

- Find out which faculty members prefer that you speak with them in person as opposed to sending e-mails.
- Determine which faculty member you can call at home and which ones prefer that you hold all discussions during regular office hours only.
- Identify those faculty members who require an immediate response to all of their inquiries and respond accordingly.

LOVE YOUR JOB

I may not be able to say that each day has been pure bliss; however, I can say without hesitation that I love my job of being a department chairperson. Each day presents a new challenge and provides new opportunities for me to support the faculty within the department. Each day, I am afforded the privilege of influencing change within the lives of all students within the department. Each day, I am grateful for the opportunity to serve the students, my colleagues on the faculty, and the institution in this capacity. I hope that each new chairperson who reads this article will be able to say the same after serving one year, six months, and six days on the job.