Part I

Fifteen Strategies in the Building Process
If one can create a sense of community, which allows for individual and collective programs, personal development, and a sense of family to celebrate personal and collective accomplishments, a department can be a wonderful and enjoyable place to work. However, without a sense of community and family a department can be a terrible place to work in terms of having fun, being productive, and gaining satisfaction.

—A chair of a large humanities department

Creating and maintaining a positive work environment for faculty is a goal to which most chairs aspire, and which can be characterized in several ways. Ideally, faculty feel they are appreciated and supported, and in turn, they feel a commitment to the department. They support and embrace the department’s mission and are aligned with its goals and objectives. They also believe that their individual goals and objectives are appreciated and respected. While this might appear to be a somewhat utopian view, it does represent a vision of what departments can at least work toward, if not completely attain.
The Context for Leadership

The environment within which chairs operate today is vastly more complex and multidimensional than the one inhabited by their predecessors only a few years ago.

Higher education, facing change and high risks, is in need of new and better leadership now—not just in the presidency but at all levels. Leadership is not something that should be hoarded; it is not a zero-sum game. The goal must be to expand the number of leaders and the total amount of leadership. This means that institutions must make a continuous effort in two critical areas. The first is to improve the search process. The second is the need for leadership development—a subject that is not addressed at all on most campuses, leaving higher education as one of the few sectors of society that does not focus on a constant effort to find and develop leaders. (Newman, Couturier, & Scurry, 2004, p. 198)

Chairs today might feel at times that they are performing in a drama where not everyone is working from the same script; where actors come and go seemingly randomly; where members of the audience participate spontaneously in the action itself from time to time; and where critics who might never have seen an actual performance nevertheless pass judgment on its quality.

In periods of rapid and momentous change, such as higher education is currently experiencing, it is very challenging to get all the players in a department, far less in an entire institution, on the same page, so to speak. Compounding this problem is the fact that faculty lead very busy lives and often have only limited and intermittent attention to devote to departmental and institutional priorities. In addition, formerly passive spectators—students, parents, and the general public—have begun to get far more involved in the process and outcomes of higher education. Finally, regulatory authorities and policymakers have become much more vocal about what they
consider to be the inadequacies of higher education. In short, these are some of the more vocal players who might at times operate from scripts that are quite different from those commonly found in colleges and universities.

Figure 1.1 conveys the dramatic interplay of forces that affect chairs and their departments. At the core of the enterprise lies learning and performance, which carry connotations of outcomes and productivity, two watchwords that are associated with the current educational environment. Surrounding these core functions of higher education are the systems, processes, and practices that departments employ—and chairs lead—to ensure that they produce the desired results. Building on a base of mutual trust, departments open themselves to collaboration and teamwork that lead to deeper understandings of what they do and how they do it. Ultimately, understanding forms the basis for improvement and assessment. In a fully functioning department where all of these preconditions are met, chairs can work with their faculty to envision a positive future and put realizable plans in place to ensure that common goals are achieved.

Creating a positive and productive departmental culture is at once an enormous challenge for chairs and, if done properly, a source of deep satisfaction. While there are many factors that influence a work unit’s culture, we identify a set of key elements, including change management, quality assurance, assessment and accountability, advice and support, and effective leadership. How chairs work with their faculty to create conditions where innovation, quality, and results are embraced as goals for the entire department determines the extent to which they will enjoy a positive climate. We will have much more to say about these elements of departmental culture in the chapters that follow.

At yet another level, chairs participate in and are influenced by their institution’s governance structures. This is not only the level at which comprehensive policies and priorities are established, but it is the buffer between the institution and its various external stakeholders. Given the rise in activity levels in the external environment, which we referred to in the Preface, the governance system in insti-
tutions has also become more active in engaging public bodies that have an interest in their operations. Once a sanctuary for the unfe
terred creation and expression of ideas and opinions, colleges and universities have been opened up to the play of competitive market
forces and the scrutiny of policymakers and the general public.

Finally, what we call the external environment consists of a con
stellation of active forces that impinge on institutional autonomy and
self-regulation. They include elected officials who respond to the pub
clic’s demand for greater efficiency and accountability; sharp reduc
tions in public subsidies to higher education; changing demographics
and access issues; an increasingly litigious environment; and the pro
liferation and convergence of information technologies. However, it
would be shortsighted to simply view the relationship between insti
tutions and their environment as one in which institutions are pas
sive while the environment is active. More and more institutions are

Figure 1.1. The department chair’s context for leadership.
engaging in competitive and collaborative activities ranging from establishing campuses abroad to creating spin-off companies.

This chapter presents three realities that chairs face in building a positive culture and climate: aspects related to chairing a department; characteristics of academic departments; and pressing problems facing faculty. The chapter ends with a self-assessment inventory that serves both as a means for chairs and faculty to identify concerns, as well as a way to direct attention to relevant sections of the book for suggestions or ideas.

Chairing the Department

Chairs are busy people. Daily, they face tough decisions about recruiting, developing and evaluating faculty, providing raises, managing conflicts, mediating tensions, and counseling faculty about diverse topics such as promotion and tenure, midlife crises, personal and professional growth, and retirement. These responsibilities suggest myriad roles and tasks, well-documented in the literature on chairing academic departments. Implicit within these roles and tasks are the dual responsibilities of loyalty and support to the institution and advocacy for staff in the department. A continual need exists to resolve tensions on both these horizontal and vertical levels (Brown, 1977).

Individuals assume the position of chair at substantial cost to their professional interests and scholarly careers. Chairs have difficulty maintaining active lives as faculty and scholars. Moreover, the financial compensation is not commensurate with the time and energy required to perform chair duties. A chair's length of appointment seldom extends beyond two three-year or one five-year term, thereby causing institutions to underutilize individuals with administrative talents and create discontinuity in departmental leadership. This short-term prospect also means that individuals must give serious consideration to what to do after being a chair. Training for new chairs in administration and leadership often takes the form of on-the-job experience or observation of admired leaders. Like other academic administrators on campuses, departmental leaders
do what they have either observed others do when they were in these roles or emulate, often incorrectly, some other figures of the past, fantasies of Harvard Business School products, General Patton, creatures of fiction or movies, or some atavisms of leadership and authority which never were. (Bennis, 1973, p. 397)

Chairpersons are appointed by administrators, elected by faculty, or some combination of these methods for offices to which they might neither aspire nor actively seek. Eble (1986), a former English department chair and perceptive observer of academic departments, once observed:

Those who want the position are often ruled out for their wanting it. Those who don’t want it are often and unwisely forced into it. Those who assume the position must face a disdain for administration from many of their colleagues and even from themselves. (p. 2)

Their busy lives as chairs and their lack of training often preclude investing substantial time in assisting faculty in their development. Reflection on your own career will help you recognize that other professionals played a significant role in your development. Thus, the journey toward helping others begins with an assessment of your own career. Further suggestions for considering your own development are provided in Chapter 2.

The Nature of the Department

Over the years supporters and critics have argued about the merits of academic departments on college campuses. Advocating for strong departmental leadership, Leaming (2007) addresses the present-day saliency of departments:

The bottom line is that the department remains the nexus of the university. If we are to solve problems, chairpersons must pave the way. They must help find research dollars,
see that faculty remain current in knowledge and skills, get faculty to work collaboratively, and encourage faculty and students to embrace and acknowledge—with confidence and wisdom—that today’s warp-speed changes demand urgent responses and adjustments. (p. xvi)

Despite these advantages for both chairs and faculty, the nature of academic departments creates difficulties for establishing a positive faculty work environment. Departments can inhibit the development of new fields of knowledge, contribute to the isolation of professors, and promote unnecessarily narrow specialization of courses and research (Andersen, 1977). These factors cause chairs difficulty in building faculty support for departmental goals and directions. Individuals can become advocates for their own narrow specializations, and their individual excellence does not necessarily equal excellence of the team. The culture of working together needs to be present if the department is to achieve its collective goals.

Faculty can withdraw into themselves and become isolated, which causes departmental strength and vitality to wax and wane. In such situations, academic departments do not become dynamic units where growth and development can occur. Chairs find it easier and more convenient in these instances to deflect this responsibility to faculty development centers, faculty committees, and academic deans. However, chairs should consider how they can capitalize on the strengths of departments in promoting a positive work environment for faculty and use other resources on and off campus to meet individual and departmental needs. Chapter 4 offers suggestions for creating a positive interpersonal work environment.

The Nature of Faculty Work

Interaction between chairs and faculty is a source of both satisfaction and frustration. Faculty want autonomy, but they request assistance; demand quick decisions yet belabor issues; seek power and authority but delegate decisions to administrators. Years of academic
freedom have bred a workforce of rugged individualists who embrace peer group arrangements often described by terms such as collegial, oligarchic, feudal, or caste-based (Wolvoord, et al., 2000). Such arrangements or even perceptions of how departments should operate can create major issues in making changes, particularly those not initiated by the faculty. National reports about professors portray a changing picture of academic life marked by greater measures of accountability, fewer tenure-track positions, and less discretionary time to spend on preferred research and teaching activities. Evidence indicates that in recent years faculty work conditions have changed and even deteriorated on many campuses. Various reports also suggest that salaries are not keeping pace and faculty are expected to generate more resources for their institutions. Some would say that higher education is becoming more like a business through adopting many of the same procedures and tools, some of which might be appropriate for higher education, while others might not be appropriate at all to the context. All of these conditions suggest that even though faculty positions might still be seen as highly regarded, they require a different mindset and set of skills than in previous times.

A need exists for each chairperson to have a better understanding of the situation of their faculty with an eye toward means, both subtle and direct, that will facilitate good interpersonal communication with their staff and enable faculty to grow and develop.

A Self-Assessment

Before proceeding to other parts of this book, we suggest that readers complete the self-assessment checklist below. If you are a faculty member, consider whether the questions apply to your chairperson and department. Similarly, if you are a dean, consider the extent to which the questions are relevant to particular chairs you work with.

The list is not meant to exhaust all possible situations. It focuses on key issues or concerns identified by chairs in our study and directs the reader to specific portions of the book that might be helpful. After completing the assessment and reviewing strategies
mentioned in the following chapters, try a few of them. Later, return to Chapter 13 of the book and review whether you have followed the dimensions of the building process.

**The Building Process (Part I)**

Answer each of the following with a yes or a no.

**About the Self-Development of Chairs (Chapter 2)**
1. Are your mentoring activities effective with faculty?
2. Have effective team relationships developed in the department?
3. Do you provide encouragement or reinforcement to faculty?
4. Do senior and new faculty work well together?
5. Do you have adequate knowledge about the department—its history, strengths, mission, faculty, and students—to be effective?
6. Have you built networks with other chairs and administrators on campus?
7. Have you achieved a balance among professional, personal, and leisure activities?
8. Do you have a plan for your career after serving as the chair?
9. Have you been able to keep current in your discipline or academic field?

**About Leading an Academic Department (Chapter 3)**
10. Has your department developed a clear vision for the future?
11. Do the faculty demonstrate ownership of and commitment to this vision?
12. Do you have an ongoing process to identify areas that are in need of change?
13. Is the process for the allocation of resources clearly understood by the faculty within the department?
14. Is the department database adequate to provide the information you need to make decisions?
15. Do faculty understand how data or information is used in decision making?
About Interacting Positively with Faculty (Chapter 4)

16. Do faculty in the department perceive that there is an open, supportive atmosphere or culture?
17. Are your listening skills effective?
18. Do you regularly assist faculty in setting realistic goals and priorities?
19. Do you provide regular feedback to faculty about their performance in the areas of teaching, research, scholarship, and service?
20. Are faculty aware of your role as an advocate for them with senior administration?
21. Do faculty perceive that you follow through on initiatives?

About Applying the Strategies to Specific Faculty Issues (Part II)

22. Do you have new faculty in your department who need to be oriented and acclimated to the unit? (Chapter 5)
23. Do senior faculty perceive that they have a role to play in developing new faculty? (Chapter 5)
24. Have you found ways to improve the teaching performance of faculty? (Chapter 6)
25. Do you need to improve the scholarly performance of faculty in your department? (Chapter 7)
26. Do you have faculty in the department who lack vitality and enthusiasm? (Chapter 8)
27. Is the performance of any faculty member being affected by personal problems? (Chapter 9)
28. Does your department have a technology plan, and is it used to inform curricular and budget decisions? (Chapter 10)
29. Is technology being used effectively as a teaching/learning tool? (Chapter 10)
30. Do faculty use technology effectively? (Chapter 10)
31. Do faculty understand the implications of reduced funding, and are they prepared to reallocate resources or seek new sources? (Chapter 11)
32. Are faculty willing to be entrepreneurial and look for new ways to deliver instruction? (Chapter 11)

33. Have you developed an agenda with your faculty that will support and strengthen your department as it changes over time? (Chapter 12)

34. Are faculty committed to quality and productivity in teaching, research, and service? (Chapter 12)

If you have answered several of these questions with “yes,” give yourself and your faculty a pat on the back. For those you answered with “no,” or if you found yourself saying, “sometimes,” “we used to,” “some of us,” or “I wish,” then you will find the chapters that follow beneficial to you as an academic leader as you develop strategies, activities, and processes designed to change or inspire your department.

Endnotes


Suggested Resources


Andersen’s chapter begins by tracing the history of the academic department back to Harvard University in 1739, then she describes the evolution of departments and the influence of the early universities in Europe and England. She quotes famous people, such as Thomas Jefferson, who strongly supported the importance of an academic department to the educational process. The article also includes sections that describe critics of departments and the advantages of departments, and it concludes with some strategies for improving departments.

Brown’s chapter emphasizes the importance of academic freedom in the organization of universities. He then describes the importance of departmental leadership and expectations. This leadership must acknowledge the nature of faculty and the role of committees. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the role of the dean and president in relationship to departmental leadership.


The author, a former department chair and dean, provides a guide to the overall management of the department. Along with much sage advice, Leaming provides ideas and strategies to address the multitude of departmental and institutional processes involving personnel and everyday matters that are crucial to effectiveness. He provides illustrations and methods to address salient issues. Many helpful references are identified.


This monograph reviews the research on department chairing and emphasizes strategies for effectiveness. Areas addressed include roles and responsibilities, chair as leader, chair’s politics and power, role in faculty evaluation and development, influence of academic disciplines, and future challenges.


This publication provides an overview of departments and makes the case for why and how they can make changes. The focus is not only on what departments look like today but how they need to be. Beyond a case made for both external and internal pressures for change, many ideas are presented for how departments can make changes. The book explores the research behind academic values, disciplines, relations with central administration, departmental organization, departmental leadership, and departmental work with implications for change. Numerous examples and research findings are provided to reinforce the change emphasis. An extensive bibliography is included.