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5 Tips on Surviving Your First Year as a Department Head

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Roughly half of the people you meet after being named department chair will start the conversation with "Congratulations!" But an occasional smirk makes it feel as if many are saying, "Condolences." (The other half actually start the conversation with some variant of "Condolences.") And you haven't even officially started yet.

As a first-time chair, you are armed with only peripheral leadership experience, with whatever supportive relationships exist in the department, and with a faculty hungry (or maybe reluctant?) for more, better, different, or even status-quo guidance.

Your job starts the moment the appointment is announced. Once the soon-to-be-ex chair begins jettisoning work onto your desk, foot traffic by your office will increase rapidly, and your calendar will fill with more and more meeting requests. The dean wants to start discussing your "new strategic plan." The office manager is either threatening to quit or telling you about how other staff members are disgruntled and threatening to quit. Good times?

Starter Kit: New to the Administration

At the University of North Carolina's Institute for the Arts and Humanities, we run a nine-month program for new and reappointed department chairs. Affectionately referred to as "chairapy," our chairs-leadership program organizes monthly meetings in a confidential setting throughout the academic year to help chairs process challenges, successes, bewilderments, frustrations, and ideas with colleagues who are experiencing much of the same. In the course of running this program, we have learned a lot about what to do, what not to do, when to take chances, and when to back off. Here are some of our collected highlights for surviving your first year as chair.

You no longer have peers in your department. Relationship dynamics get off kilter when you assume the role of chair. Close colleagues may think they can make special requests. Some faculty members with whom you had little or no relationship suddenly want to become your best buddy. Your "leadership team" (e.g., associate chair and perhaps the department's various directors of graduate studies, undergraduate studies, research) may make your life easier, or tougher.

One thing is certain: You immediately become the most popular person at the dance.

You can prepare for the changing dynamics. Don't assume that colleagues who used to keep your comments confidential will still do so. Not to say you should be suspicious of everyone — just mind what you share. The rumor mill is as strong in academe as it was in middle school.

A helpful strategy is to set expectations upfront. Talk to your colleagues, either in small groups (full professors, associate professors, lecturers, etc.) and/or at a departmentwide meeting. Be careful not to show favoritism, even to that one professor who has been your closest colleague. People are looking for reasons to either support you or point out your mistakes. Stay on the high-integrity side of the fence.

You suddenly serve a lot of different audiences. Your formal appointment might be at the will of the dean, but effectively you have many faculty constituents who can help make things work in the department or torpedo your efforts.

This can be one of the trickiest lines to walk as chair. People in the department expect you to remain "of the faculty" and be a good advocate for them to the dean's office. The dean expects you to be a good foot soldier and not make his or her life any more complex than it already is. Oh, you need to make sure that students, parents, and staff members, too, are kept satisfied. And don't forget about your donors and alumni.

Chairs are notoriously stuck in the middle, serving everyone in all directions. That's why the job may be the toughest in higher education. Allegiances and alliances can make you feel as if you're stuck in a live version of the *Game of Thrones*.

Don't step too far one way or the other — at the risk of getting your head lopped off. Political savvy is crucial as chair. Listen well. Really well. Understand people's needs, concerns, dreams, and desires. Make sure they feel heard and seen. Then rouse your courage and set healthy, appropriate boundaries — in all directions. Better to do that early than try to play catch-up after everyone has figured how to run roughshod over you.

One solution: Find your "new" community. It may be with other chairs on the campus, with trusted colleagues at other institutions, or with people outside of the workplace. Having a safe space where you can talk openly about the stresses and challenges of the job is cathartic, given its intensity, and will help you avoid isolation and loneliness — two easy traps of the role.

"It's the budget, stupid." Remember what your constituents care about most: money. They want to know how the department will pay for faculty lines, graduate students, curriculum needs, copier machines, IT equipment, pencils.

Perhaps the most important thing to start learning quickly is how your department's budget works, how it fits into the institution's financial structures and plans, and how much money you will have to work with.

Manage your time and your focus. You can find a wealth of literature preaching productivity strategies (including many we employ in our chairapy program). Whatever methodology you subscribe to, stay aware of the need to maintain your own scholarship.

The chair's job is inherently temporary. Whether you're in the role for a few years or 10, you have a limited time to achieve your goals. Why did you agree to do it in the first place? What are you aiming to accomplish? Be skeptical whether every "emergency" that comes across your desk actually merits that label (actual "emergencies" in, say, a math department are, thankfully, few and far between). Give your time and energy to your important, long-term goals as chair.

And if your long-term goals include your own research — if they don't, why not? — do not hesitate to block out time in your calendar to work on them.

You're no good to anyone if you don't take care of yourself. An avalanche of meetings and demands will try to overwhelm your personal life and your physical well-being, in quite negative ways if you are not careful. Weight gain in the first year as chair may rival that of the "freshman 15" (as one of us unfortunately experienced firsthand).

If you set the email auto-response when you are traveling (whether for work or vacation), stick to it. You may be surprised how many problems take care of themselves among people who learn that you are unavailable to fix them right away.

Know who the important people in your life are and make commitments early to them — and "them" can absolutely include yourself. We know one chair who has a quiet spot she goes to every day and sits for about 30 minutes as a way to clear her head and refresh. Another chair makes weekends nonnegotiable family time. Find an approach that works for you, and for them.

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