

# ED363165 1993-10-00 The Department Chair: New Roles, Responsibilities and Challenges. ERIC Digest.

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## Table of Contents

If you're viewing this document online, you can click any of the topics below to link directly to that section.

<a href="#">The Department Chair: New Roles, Responsibilities and Challenges. ERIC Digest.....</a>	<a href="#">2</a>
<a href="#">WHAT ARE THE ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES OF CHAIRS?...</a>	<a href="#">2</a>
<a href="#">WHAT ARE THE REQUIREMENTS FOR LEADERSHIP?.....</a>	<a href="#">3</a>
<a href="#">HOW CAN THE CHAIR EFFECTIVELY USE POLITICAL INFLUENCE AND POWER?.....</a>	<a href="#">3</a>
<a href="#">WHAT IS THE CHAIR'S ROLE IN FACULTY EVALUATION AND DEVELOPMENT?.....</a>	<a href="#">3</a>
<a href="#">WHAT ARE THE INFLUENCES OF INSTITUTIONAL TYPE AND DISCIPLINE.....</a>	<a href="#">4</a>
<a href="#">WHAT DOES THE FUTURE HOLD?.....</a>	<a href="#">4</a>
<a href="#">REFERENCES.....</a>	<a href="#">5</a>



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# The Department Chair: New Roles, Responsibilities and Challenges. ERIC Digest.

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The academic department is the base unit of universities and colleges, "the central building block...of the American university" (Trow 1977). While departments fragment and divide the faculty of an institution of higher education, they also provide a useful structure for the day-to-day activities that shape faculty members' attitudes, behaviors, and performances.

The metaphor of a block of wood held in a vise for shaping seems appropriate to describe the situation of an academic chair. The chair is squeezed between the demands of upper administration and institutional expectations on the one side and the expectations of faculty, staff, and students on the other, with both attempting to influence and shape the chair. The chair is caught in the middle, required to provide the most sophisticated leadership and statesmanship to avoid being crushed by these two opposing forces.

The purpose of The Department Chair is to glean from the research insights about the chairs or heads of academic departments who are caught in the middle. The literature documents that chairs of academic departments in the 1990s will be expected to perform in an increasingly complex, diverse, and changing environment, with ever-increasing expectations from the institution and the faculty. The following issues are most often raised as needing attention: (1) roles and responsibilities of chairs, (2) the chair as leader, (3) the political influences on the chair and the use of power, (4) the chair's responsibility for evaluation and development of faculty, (5) the influence of institutional type and specific discipline on the chair, and (6) challenges facing chairs in the 1990s and beyond.

## WHAT ARE THE ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES OF CHAIRS?

Numerous studies have been conducted on the tasks, activities, roles, and responsibilities of departmental chairs, but despite researchers' ability to identify tasks and job-related duties, the chair's role continues to be ambiguous, unclear in terms of authority, and unable to be classified as faculty or administrator--all of which contribute to a high level of stress. Thus, the chair must learn to cope readily with the demands of being in the middle, with responsibilities to both faculty and administration.

## WHAT ARE THE REQUIREMENTS FOR

## LEADERSHIP?

Institutions of higher education differ from many organizations, requiring leadership to be a more shared phenomenon than in most profit-focused enterprises. The concept of faculty ownership is basic to academic institutions; thus, departmental leadership requires greater emphasis on empowering activities than in many other types of organizations. The chair, in concert with faculty, must develop a vision beyond the immediate tasks and employ strategies that develop the faculty's commitment to that vision. While chairs have opportunities to exercise leadership in a number of different settings, including faculty meetings, offices and laboratories, the total institution, and the disciplinary community, the requirements of leadership vary depending on the department's stage of development, the specific management function, the academic discipline, and the chair's own style of leadership. The chair must ensure that an effective data base exists for informed decision making, try to understand the use and dynamics of the politics of the institution, use faculty members' strengths to develop quality, and create an environment where faculty can strengthen their own professional status through the achievement of a shared vision.

## HOW CAN THE CHAIR EFFECTIVELY USE POLITICAL INFLUENCE AND POWER?

A number of internal and external constituencies--faculty, upper-level administration, the institution's governing body, legislative bodies, accrediting bodies, other external agencies and groups--influence decision making in the department. Institutions of higher education are, to a large extent, open political systems. Chairs draw upon two primary sources of power: the authority outlined in formal job descriptions and the informal influence of personal characteristics, expertise, and ability to capitalize on opportunity. Chairs must understand the political forces and processes of the institution and must skillfully maneuver groups and coalitions to achieve the autonomy and control necessary to develop a strong department. Chairs must skillfully use certain strategies (called push, pull, persuasion, preventative, and preparatory strategies in the literature) and tactics (impression management, agenda setting, networking, and negotiation) to manage an effective department.

## WHAT IS THE CHAIR'S ROLE IN FACULTY EVALUATION AND DEVELOPMENT?

The quality of the program of an academic department is largely determined by the quality and performance of the faculty. Evaluation, the process of making judgments about performance, is one of the most powerful opportunities for developing quality available to a chair.

For a chair to evaluate faculty effectively, the reasons for the evaluation and the techniques to be employed must be clear to the chair, the dean, and the faculty. Procedures to evaluate faculty can provide focus, clarify expectations for work, give

direction to faculty members' efforts, and define the need for faculty development. What is to be measured, how it is to be measured, who is to measure, and the indicators of quality must be carefully considered. The chair must provide that leadership in developing and implementing evaluation of the faculty (Braskamp, Brandenburg, and Ory 1984).

A second and equally powerful opportunity to encourage quality is faculty development--the process of assisting faculty to grow professionally by gaining an understanding of institutional expectations, improving performance in teaching or research, creating a positive work environment, refocusing or redirecting activities, and helping faculty resolve and deal with personal issues. Faculty development is a shared responsibility that can be facilitated through a number of activities and strategies, including orientation sessions, mentoring, intervention in teaching and research, providing models of desired behaviors, considering alternative professional career paths, and assisting faculty in using available resources, such as employee assistance programs.

## WHAT ARE THE INFLUENCES OF INSTITUTIONAL TYPE AND DISCIPLINE

ON THE CHAIR?The roles and responsibilities of and expectations for the chair are all influenced by the type of institution and by differences in methodology and body of knowledge of specific academic disciplines. The chair must recognize how institutional type, history, and culture, model of governance, and discipline can influence what is expected of him or her, in turn determining the most effective strategies to use. Chairs should take advantage of opportunities for professional development through programs offered by a number of organizations, institutions, and professional associations.

## WHAT DOES THE FUTURE HOLD?

Institutions of higher education face a number of challenges in the remainder of the 1990s and beyond: quality, diversity and gender, recruitment and retention of faculty, funding for professional development, faculty workloads, evaluation, minority students, and ethics. These challenges have no quick fixes, and they can be met and dealt with only through the combined efforts of the entire academic leadership team, including the chief executive, the academic officer, deans, chairs, and faculty. The quality of leadership must be improved at all levels. Chairs should consider human resources, the structure of the organization, and political and symbolic frames of reference in providing leadership to the department. They must pay attention to upgrading leadership skills through mentoring, reading, workshops, self-assessment, and networking. Creating a professional development plan can assist chairs to identify needs, specify objectives, and design techniques for assessment.

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