

## CHAPTER ONE

WHY DEPARTMENT CHAIRS  
ARE IMPORTANT

The new chair of the Art History Department was looking forward to taking charge of her new responsibilities. She thought she could make a difference in her department, which had always seemed to her to be stuck in the past. She was surprised to hear her predecessor speak bitterly of his time in the office. “I never wanted this job,” said Professor Ferguson, gathering his box of papers. “It was my turn,” he shrugged. “Now it’s yours. Good luck!”

Not so long ago, many department chairs like Professor Ferguson got the job because “it was their turn.” Chairing the department was seen as a chore, a minor nuisance that got in their way until they had served their time. Some departments rewarded those who were willing to take on these management chores with tacit permission to support and forward their own specialization. Other chairs were expected simply to echo the dean’s opinions or to blindly sign off on a course schedule that was the same every year, pass along “administrivia,” and not get in the way. Inevitably, after a year or two, they finally learn enough about budgeting, resource management and development, personnel development, and curriculum and course scheduling to do their jobs effectively—but then it was time to give up the job to someone else . . . who also felt unknowledgeable and uncomfortable, unprepared to actively lead their units (Chu and Veregge, 2002).

Thankfully, times have changed. The contemporary mission of most department chairs is much more active and demanding. As higher education faces economic and social challenges, as administration is flattened due to budget cuts, and as competition

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for students and funding grows, chairs have increasingly found themselves in the center of the action.

Research tells us that very few chairs today agree to take on the job because they want power. It's not a career choice. It's a choice based on the need to serve their students, their colleagues, and the disciplines they represent. There is no one better positioned than the chair to do what is right and necessary for the department.

#### CASE STUDY: A SUCCESSFUL DEPARTMENT CHAIR

Department chairs have probably never been as important as they are today. In some ways, as you will learn, the position of department chair is more powerful than that of chancellor because it offers the very real opportunity to get things done. The following case study illustrates the significance of effective chair leadership.

Dr. Li has been teaching in the Department of Mathematics for over twenty years. During that time, he has risen through the ranks, earning tenure and promotion to full professor along the way. Dr. Li has always been a tireless worker, teaching what needs to be offered, serving on countless committees without complaint, and advising multitudes of majors, all while gaining recognition for his applied mathematics scholarship.

Before he became chair several years ago, the department felt pressure from the all too common problems facing many academic departments today. As Chair Li put it, "Even before the recession, it didn't seem as if we could get enough faculty to teach all the courses everyone wanted us to teach. With so much to do, it was difficult for any of the faculty to do anything other than just teach. There was so little time to do research or to complete grant proposals. All of the faculty felt like rats on a treadmill, just running and running with no way to stop. The faster we ran, it seemed, the faster we needed to go just to keep from falling off."

In the twenty years that Professor Li has been in the department, he has heard many of his fellow faculty complain about the lack of support and respect for mathematics. "They would say, 'How can we do anything when we aren't supported?'" So when Dr. Li became chair, he decided to do something about it. He knew that the important problems facing his department could

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not be solved using the same level of thinking that was used to create those problems. It was time to engage both creatively and proactively.

First, he carefully analyzed his expenditures and made sure his budget was being used efficiently. He found that the department was being charged for many office and lab landline phones. Because these phones were barely used, he had them disconnected, saving about \$2,000 per year. He then convinced the dean to allow him to redirect these funds into the purchase of laptop computers specially configured to assist the faculty with their instruction. Every year, he had a \$2,000 fund to invest because this money was no longer being wasted on unused phone rental fees. “It wasn’t rocket science,” he explains. “I just had to do it. It wasn’t difficult. It should have been done long ago.”

The next step in his resource review was to look at the curriculum and course schedule. “We revised some of our lower-division courses to make them much more efficient,” he says. “We produced the same enrollment with five or six fewer sections. This saved us lots of money that would have been used to pay adjuncts. I was able to convince the dean to allow us to use this money for travel to read for my faculty.”

Dr. Li also engaged technology to help his faculty teach the basic college mathematics series. By adding hybrid and online courses to complement the face-to-face courses, he freed a number of his full-time faculty from the schedules they had been tied to for decades. “My faculty could put their lectures and PowerPoints online either synchronously or asynchronously, which was more attractive to their students. Because the faculty see each student’s work, there is more interaction with individual students. Students could no longer hide in our traditional face-to-face sections by keeping their heads down so as to appear that they were working. Professors could actually see what each student was or was not doing.”

Enrollments have increased markedly as students who work full time are able to fit classes into their work and family schedules. “We’ve seen more student satisfaction because students get more individual feedback in some part due to the laptops purchased for the faculty. These allow the faculty to correct formulas and

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equations easily and allow students to see the corrections almost immediately. Students no longer go off on the wrong track for entire class sessions and get further and further behind as much as they used to.” Chair Li is able to schedule fewer sections because the popularity of courses offered through multiple technologies ensures that the sections that are offered are filled to capacity. He says, “I don’t have faculty getting to their 8:00 A.M. and 5:00 P.M. classes only to find less than half the seats filled on Mondays and Fridays.”

With some of the money he saved by pruning his course schedule, Chair Li has been able to hire graduate assistants to help his faculty with the lower-level math courses. He discovered that there have been students interested in graduate work in math for some time; by funding them with teaching assistantships, what had been an almost nonexistent graduate program has blossomed in numbers and excitement. “Most of the math problems lower-division students face are the same year in and year out. Training graduate students to work through these problems with them freed up my faculty to do much more advanced work, including their own research.”

He adds, “We have a research culture developing between my faculty, who can now do more of their own research, and the students, who are excited to be learning how to teach math and who can help the faculty with advanced mathematics. It’s becoming fun again.”

Now that the faculty have more schedule flexibility and research assistance, they have begun reaching out more to other departments and to funding agencies that can help them with their research. “My faculty members don’t feel that they are on the treadmill anymore. They have the time, and I have some funds to support them. They have always loved teaching, but now they feel that they are professors once more.”

But perhaps the most important variable in this successful algorithm for department improvement has been Dr. Li’s willingness to serve his faculty and students. “My faculty members see that I am teaching courses that I don’t have to teach. They see me supporting their work more than just trying to build up my own specialization. They see me engaged in curriculum reform and putting in the hours it takes to improve student learning.

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When they see me do this, they are willing to support me and the changes I am making to improve our department for the future.”

What has been the result? Within three years of Dr. Li’s leadership, his department—which had languished in the bottom of the rankings for years—has risen to the top of the state university system’s rankings of student success in general studies mathematics preparation. Major numbers have risen significantly, and graduate enrollments have shot through the roof. Whereas math had been seen as a problematic department before Dr. Li assumed the chair’s position, it is now seen as a model of efficiency and productivity. All of this has been accomplished with the same or less overall budget and numbers of faculty.

Reflecting on his first years in administration, Chair Li says, “I am surprised that more departments don’t do what we have done. It is not a mysterious formula. It is mostly determining what works for the faculty and students and what has not worked. It has involved changing course schedules and faculty workload, and that took some getting used to; but the rewards have been immediate and obvious. Working in the same fiscal environment and under the same budgetary restrictions as other departments within the same college, we have accomplished much more than most of them. My colleagues throughout our college have noticed the changes. Other department chairs have asked me how we did this—how we changed both the effectiveness of our teaching and our productivity as scholars, but also how we have revitalized the spirit of the department. We wanted to do things better, and that’s what we have achieved. We are all very proud.”

## A FORMULA FOR SUCCESS

In Dr. Li’s department, the difference has been the chair. His formula for success was simple and elegant:

- He chose to lead and learned how to do it.
- He gained faculty support by leveraging the respect he had earned with them through his selfless service.
- He carefully analyzed the current budget, curriculum, and course schedule to maximize productivity (in the way of enrollments and quality student learning) and reduce costs.

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- He gained the support of the dean to reinvest his department's money in technology, graduate students, and professional development that would build the strength of the department in the future.

Chair Li is a hardworking scientist who wants to do his part to advance his students, his department, and his university and to contribute his scholarship. In that way, he is like almost every college faculty member. As a chair, however, it is his willingness to lead that makes him stand out. He engaged the same qualities of intelligence, energy, and persistence that he used to earn his terminal degree and put them to work to help his department colleagues and students.

“The chair is responsible,” he says, explaining why he took his leadership of the department so seriously. “If I had looked the other way or done nothing or just signed off and didn't try to make things better for my colleagues and students—if I didn't do something to try to make things better—then I was part of the problem.”

Importantly, he assumed responsibility for managing efficiently and leading his department toward higher levels of achievement. He also put the time in to learn the mechanics of organizational management and leadership. Chair Li puts it in mathematic terms: “Before you can do calculus, you must learn to do basic algebra.”