

Working Effectively with the Dean

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Department chairs can attest to their unique position of working simultaneously for the dean and the faculty in the department. Clearly this can be an awkward position where each side expects the chair to listen to and carry the message to the other. On some issues, this struggle between "two masters" can be a major source of chair stress. We assume the most regular, comfortable, and effective communication occurs between the chair and the faculty. However, the communication between the dean and the chair is equally important and cannot be neglected. In this article we review why this communication is critical to both chairs and deans and summarize key ideas that can enhance its efficacy.

In most institutions, the dean is a central authority in perhaps the full spectrum of activities that can enhance or diminish the department's prospects for achieving overall success. The dean is the main arbiter of budgets and their allocation, a source of potential funding for projects and new initiatives, or allowance (or permission) for carry-over funding. The dean usually authorizes changes in faculty work expectations, including teaching loads, release time, or other special course considerations. Permission to hire new, temporary, or replacement faculty and staff is often a dean prerogative.

Faculty issues involving promotion and tenure, salary adjustments, and the like are either decided by the dean or final decisions are based on recommendations by the dean. Deans are also involved in the development of departments' long-term plans and their mission-vision statements. The role of the dean is paramount in facilitating success and opportunity for the department.

The chair-dean relationship, however, is not a one-way street. Deans also depend on chairs. The dean presides over many departments, some of which can be far distant from the discipline that the dean has experienced as a faculty member and administrator. This would be most manifest with a dean of arts and sciences. In such cases deans will depend on chairs to "educate" them about needs, characteristics, and expectations of academic units that span from physics to philosophy. Deans also depend on chairs to "translate" or frame new policies and expectations to faculty in ways that are consistent with unit culture to ensure that they are followed and understood. It has been said that deans are only as effective as their department chairs.

Combining both directions of the chair-dean relationship is essential in addressing key elements for promoting the department's success. Some examples follow.

Success through resources and resource management.

Deans and chairs can work together to ensure that department funding is fungible—that is, not rigorously tied to predefined or prescribed budget categories. The dean can give local independence to the chair on how the department budget is allocated among categories with flexibility for carryover. The dean can be approached to provide matching funding for external proposals to ensure that department and school goals can be achieved. The dean and chair can also identify areas of improvement or increased success that will lead to budget enhancement, such as returning a portion of increased tuition income derived through enhanced enrollment, a share of indirect cost recovery (overhead) from increases in external funding, or other rewards that are incentive-based.

Creation and maintenance of high productivity and an efficacious environment.

The dean and chair both have interests in establishing productive work environments for faculty. Not only does this impact the year-to-year unit output but it also is a critical ingredient in recruiting new faculty. Major items for candid discussion include faculty workloads, merit-based incentives including salaries and bonuses, and special recognition for examples of noteworthy excellence in aspects of faculty work.

Institutional infrastructure to support missions.

Campus and unit infrastructure should support faculty scholarship and the educational mission. Areas where deans and chairs might work together to ensure this include available technology and the support staff with expertise in a range of newer electronic pedagogies, distance education, testing centers, and so on. In addition, support for faculty development in areas related to classroom teaching and student learning environments as well as support structures for scholarship (travel, internal seed funds, equipment purchase and maintenance, grant writing help) all contribute to essential infrastructure.

Curriculum and program initiatives.

Creative people can sometimes envision new degrees or degree options that have present or future potential to increase visibility and value to the institution. Such initiatives cannot succeed without collaboration at the department level and above. Planning for such endeavors may involve new faculty hires, revised strategic plans, new or renovated space, changes in assignments, and additional staff, among others. The dean's local resources and ability to directly bring this potential to campus administration are key to this planning. Recognizing that new program initiatives can be transformational for both the department and school (or college) is an essential step in building a stronger campus.

These examples must be tailored to the discipline, culture, and expectations of the unit and are dependent on the ability of the institution to deliver the necessary resources and support. It is essential that the initiatives brought to the dean resonate with the mission and vision statements of the school and the institution. Furthermore, the dean needs to recognize the catalytic consequences of supporting a new initiative or curriculum modernization.

Similarly, there are items that the dean must bring to the chair. Dean expectations of a chair include, among others, departmental adherence to campus mission and a well thought out departmental plan, effective practice of campus and school priorities to faculty, and a strong role in providing critical campus data such as improving retention rates, external funding profiles, scholarly productivity, graduation rates, and faculty awards. Deans also expect minimal conflict among students, staff, and faculty, and when conflict does occur they much prefer to be briefed ahead of time about what is coming to their offices.

The dean also expects several personal attributes in chairs that facilitate communication and inspire confidence in their ability to perform well globally. While the list is lengthy, it would include characteristics such as integrity, honesty, trustworthiness, credibility, civility, candor, and forthrightness. The chair needs to be an effective departmental advocate, but also able to demonstrate a willingness to put campus- or school- wide priorities over personal or departmental interests when appropriate. The chair needs to recognize the limits of argument and persuasion and when to yield or concede issues. This does not mean compromising principles, but it does mean understanding the balance between authority and principle. Sustained conflict is not an asset to the chair-dean relationship. Finally, because the chair has the advantage of knowledge of local detail and culture, it can be tempting to overstate a case in order to win a concession or gain resources. In the long run, however, accurate and honest assessment is best.

Moving to a more personal dimension, knowing when and how to approach the dean with a special request or to discuss an important matter can be a factor in the ultimate success of the visit. Knowing how the dean prefers to be approached-formal meeting appointments, drop-by visits, invitations to coffee or lunch-can set the tone for the meeting. Chairs who are on good terms with the dean's staff have the advantage of seeding their ideas through others who have ready access to the dean and to ask whether a given time is a good one to approach the dean. Chairs may learn from the dean's assistant or secretary when the dean is very busy and occupied with a special project, when the dean has had an unpleasant encounter with someone, or when the dean is having a difficult day for any reason. Unless the visit is a true emergency, these situations indicate that another day or another time might prove more productive or successful.

Many of the suggestions here may be simple common sense. However, over the course of our combined 27 years of chair experience, we have seen these issues arise again and again. Favorable interaction with the dean is sometimes challenging, sometimes troubling, and must be productive and mutually valuable. So we have created our "Ten Do's" and "Ten Don'ts" lists.

Almost ten do's:

- Protect the investment of the institution in its faculty; mentor, support, and advise them well.
- Respond to the needs and priorities of the dean.
- Provide positive accomplishments and achievements in the department's success.
- Publicly thank the dean for creative and positive accomplishments and wise investments.
- Respond quickly and earnestly to requests for information, data, or otherwise.
- Provide data that facilitates the dean's interactions with higher administration.

- Provide stories, vignettes, or anecdotes that personalize the department and provide positive perspectives on the faculty and students.
- Alert the dean early to potential problems, adverse publicity, or growing hazards.

Ten don'ts:

- Don't overspend or over commit budgets and allocations.
- Don't overstay your welcome in the dean's office.
- Don't repeat requests excessively.
- Don't demand additional resources or concessions.
- Don't regularly violate the chain of command or your institutional protocols.
- Don't provide surprises and unanticipated conflicts.
- Don't be argumentative and judgmental.
- Don't encourage student visits en masse or more public demonstrations of antipathy.
- Don't aver your requests while panning the requests or resources of others.
- Don't misrepresent facts, statistics, or situations for the purpose of gain.

Finally, enjoy the opportunity to build your department and get the most from the resources you have. Where resources are in short supply, imagine out-of-the-box solutions that can favorably impress your dean with your cleverness and resourcefulness.

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