

Lessons Learned as a Department Chair

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For whatever it may or may not be worth, before I end this last message as chair I want to tell you some of the things I've learned or had reinforced while in the job (apologies to those who suffered as I learned!):

- Administration is critically important to a successful department, school and university and involves a lot more than most of those who aren't administrators think.
- Effective, regular communication at all levels is critically important for successful administration.
- Too many administrators (as too many faculty and people generally of course) aren't effective communicators.
- Policies and procedures, and the interests of the department and institution, are very important, but people - and treating them with fairness, honesty, respect and compassion - are more important.
- High faculty and staff morale, which depends on effective communication and valuing people over policy among other things, is critically important for successful administration and makes life a lot more pleasant.
- Many meetings are of limited value - too often they're scheduled because they've always been scheduled, they last too long, they feature announcements that are more suited to e-mail or other formats, the distributed agendas are too general and/or not followed, the agenda tasks could be accomplished in focused discussions among smaller groups of people, etc.
- A seemingly limitless number of formal and informal barriers and challenges often make trying to accomplish administrative goals incredibly frustrating, but finally accomplishing them can be very satisfying.
- Nearly all academic administrators both impose decisions (top down administration) and determine and implement the decisions of their colleagues (bottom up administration); finding the right balance between the two is essential to success; I think the most effective administrators lead not by imposing or following but by whenever possible guiding discussions to build reasonable and practical consensus.
- There's only so much time and energy, so administrators can choose to do more things less carefully and thus less well, or fewer things more carefully and thus more effectively; again, finding the right balance is essential to success (if I err, I prefer to err on the side of doing fewer things better).

- Successful administrators (as others) invest great amounts of time and physical and emotional energy into their job but they always remember it's just a job (we all may feel indispensable at times but our institution will carry on with or without us - it's more important to enjoy our life).
- Effective administrators at all levels seek to make incremental and infrequent but regular, scheduled changes rather than shock-to-the-system, constant and unpredictable changes.
- The best administrators always remember that faculty are peers and not subordinates, and treat them accordingly.
- Effective administrators keep organized records for their own and their successors' use, and know that statements and promises are nice but having and keeping them in writing is better (though still not always a guarantee).
- The vast majority of faculty (and administrators for that matter) are hardworking, cooperative, and collegial; unfortunately administrators have to spend too much time thinking about and dealing with the others.
- Administrators (and the rest of us) have to find the right balance between short, terse, bullet-pointed communications (reports, e-mail messages, etc.) and long, detailed, elaborate communications; I tend to favor the latter too much but I'm working on it (so that's my last bullet point here!)."

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