The Formal (and Informal) Roles of the Department Chair

Dr. Tim Chapin, Dean
College of Social Sciences & Public Policy
Florida State University
tchapin@fsu.edu
“An institution can run for a long time with an inept president, but not for long with inept chairpersons.”

The Chapin Corollary

“Department chair is the best, most rewarding, and hardest job in academic leadership.”

T. Chapin

A Beleaguered Academic Administrator’s Manifesto*

December, 2020

*Note: Book not under contract, nor being actively written.
So... Why Are You Doing this Job?
So, Why Are You Doing this Job?

• As a way to demonstrate competence to move up the administrative ladder?
• To contribute to the “good of the order”?
• You have ideas that will make things better?
• You want to relieve the burden of administrative issues on others?
• Other reasons?
• *Whatever is driving your willingness to serve, do not lose sight of it over your term(s)*
Formal Roles of the Chair

• There are many clearly established *formal* roles and responsibilities for Department Heads/Chairs.

• In many ways these are the *easier* parts of the job because the faculty, students, and administration generally understand these to be your responsibilities and systems exist to help you complete these roles.
Common Formal Roles

Budget Officer
• Oversee unit’s budget
• Allocate funds
• Work with staff to track expenditures, etc.
• Financial aid decisions
• Allocate scarce resources for students
• Financial accountability

Facilities Manager
• Offices and classroom facilities
• Allocate space, lobby for more space (never less!)
• Recommend improvements and investments
• Upgrades to technology
• Enforce rules in the use of space
Common Formal Roles

Manage the Teaching Program
- Schedule classes
- Develop/manage curriculum
- Oversee teaching evaluations
- Honor Code violations
- Assist with teachers struggling

Manage Academic Personnel
- Faculty teaching loads and service assignments
- Annual evaluations of faculty
- Manage/recommend P&T
- Hiring processes and start-up
Common Formal Roles

**HR Manager**
- Staff workload/effectiveness
- Staff annual evaluations
- Staff hiring/firing

**Development**
- Friend-raising for the program
- Fundraising ideas/initiatives with Dean
- University booster in public gatherings
Common Formal Roles

**External Representation**
- Face of the unit
- Emcee at events, host, customer relations
- Positive attitude and impression
- Serve as a “potted plant” at college and university events

**Visionary Leader**
- Lead the unit in new directions (curricular, research, professional, etc.)
- Articulate a vision
- Pursue vision with vigor, and bring along everyone for the ride
- Leader and first among equals
Informal Roles of the Chair

• There are equally as many poorly understood informal roles and responsibilities for Department Heads/Chairs.

• In many ways these are the hardest parts of the job because the faculty, students, and administration implicitly understand these roles, but provide little training and support for them.
Informal Roles of the Chair

- Include:
  - Encyclopedia
    - Examples: What courses will be offered in Spring 2023? Does the graduate school allow transfer credits? How many articles is “enough” for P&T?
  - Networker Extraordinaire
    - Examples: Who at DOT can I talk to about a project idea? I want to intern at Firm X, who do you know? There’s a program in the business school we should partner with, who’s in charge over there?
Informal Roles of the Chair

• Include:
  – **Fire Fighter**
    • Examples: A data request from the Dean; An unhappy student; the copier is down; A RFP that is due tomorrow needs review and signatures
  – **Referee**
    • Examples: Disputes over space, departmental policy, allocation of resources; Student unhappiness with teachers/adjuncts
Informal Roles of the Chair

• Include:
  – **Shrink**
    • Examples: The junior faculty member having panic attacks; The student whose marriage is falling apart; The staff member who received news they have cancer
  – **The Law**
    • Examples: Sexual Harassment/Assaults; Honor code violations; Grade challenges; Policy interpretations; P&T recommendations
Informal Roles of the Chair

• Include:
  – **Cheerleader**
    • Examples: Alumni engagements; Student meetings; Recruiting events
  – **Tone Setter**
    • Examples: Greeting people with smiles; Asking how they are doing; Clear communication of conditions and activities
Formal and Informal Responses to Student and Faculty Issues

• **Students** – Dealing with students now as chair and not as faculty member; complaints; legal issues – *Scenarios*

• **Faculty** – Dealing with difficult faculty; find ways to link faculty attributes to program success – *Scenarios*
Student Scenario #1

Student Tension
There is a brusque, surly male student who talks regularly in classes in ways that make others uncomfortable. The student demeans other students, has made sexist comments towards female students, and talks about issues of race and ethnicity that are at the very edge of comfort. Faculty in the unit have tried to manage the student in their classes, with little effect.

Compounding things, it has been brought to your attention that this student has made inappropriate remarks about fellow students on the unit’s Facebook page and e-mail listserv.

As the Chair of the unit, what path(s) do you pursue?
Student Scenario #2

An Adjunct Problem?
It is the fourth week of the term, and over the last week a number of students have come to you to complain about an adjunct teaching one of your classes.

Students report the adjunct coming to class very late, keeping the class up to an hour after the scheduled class time, unannounced changes to the schedule, and a general lack of preparation.

You happen to know this adjunct and have usually found them to be an excellent professional that knows this topic and in prior years they have received solid evaluations.

As the Chair of the unit, what path(s) do you pursue?
Student Scenario #3

Not So Welcome Praise

A female student comes to your office and shows you her midterm exam, with a grade of 99. She then turns the exam over and you see a note written to her from the professor that says, “Please join me in celebrating this news at Manny’s Steakhouse! You name the date and time.”

In tears, she tells you that she thinks this is a request for a date, since Manny’s is an expensive, romantic restaurant – a place for dates and anniversaries and she has felt some “extra interest” from the professor after she confided about a recent breakup.

As the Chair of the unit, what path(s) do you pursue?
Faculty Scenario #1

The End Around

In a recent meeting the faculty considered a decision to pursue a new undergraduate degree in design, ultimately deciding against this initiative because of a perceived lack of demand and the likelihood of no new resources to support this initiative.

Unhappy about this decision, a senior member of the faculty has reached out to the Provost to lobby directly for the program. The Provost e-mailed the Dean and asked why the Department wasn’t supporting what sounded like a great program. The Dean, surprised to get this email, has reached to you out to inquire what was going on and why she was blindsided about this.

As the Chair of the unit, what path(s) do you pursue?
Faculty Scenario #2

Associate Professor for Life

An Associate Professor in your unit is a beloved teacher, engaged with the community, and a good colleague. However, they have essentially stopped producing the research needed to eventually be promoted to Full. Their passion is for outreach work, and they are an active member of several local planning bodies.

They are frustrated about the lack of support from colleagues for this outreach work, and are increasingly frustrated by other, younger faculty receiving accolades and raises while they are stuck as an Associate Professor. This frustration is starting to fester, affecting not just their work but the work of others.

As the Chair of the unit, what path(s) do you pursue?
Faculty Scenario #3

High Productivity and High Maintenance

You have a Full Professor with a publication and grant getting record that is the envy of most other faculty in the college. They are an excellent mentor and advisor for PhD students, launching the academic careers of several in other programs. However, this faculty member is not what one would label a “team player”; they undertake very little service for the unit, complain regularly about less productive colleagues, and generally make life difficult for the chair. They also have a distressing habit of going directly to the Dean to complain about the decisions you make, the lack of resources they receive, and what they perceive to be a lack of vision and drive in the unit.

As the Chair of the unit, what path(s) do you pursue?
Student/Faculty Scenarios

What are the key themes for potential Chair responses across these various scenarios?

• Find out what’s going on; Gather intelligence from a variety of sources
• Distinguish good intelligence from bad intelligence
• Understand the motivations of the people involved
• Communicate, communicate, communicate... especially with faculty colleagues
• Document issues, actions, and decisions
• Know when to involve HR and/or Legal
• Keep your Dean/Supervisor informed
Tips for Succeeding as a Chair

• Set the Tone
• Be Discreet and Trustworthy
• Make Unimportant Decisions Quickly
• Make Important Decisions Slowly
• Own Your Decisions, Even the Mistakes
• Take Care in Talking Salaries
• Spoil Your Staff
• Understand What Motivates People
• Know That Sometimes Listening is All That is Needed
• Keep Your Dean Informed... No Surprises
How to Survive (and Maybe Even Thrive!)

- Recognize and embrace the transition
- Take pride in the role
- Develop a workplan for yourself
- Try not to take anything personally
- Hang on to your core values
- Look for opportunities to grow your administrative skill set
- Take care of yourself