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Chronicle Careers<http://chronicle.com/jobs/news/2008/09/2008091701c.htm>**HEADS UP****What Deans Expect of Department Heads****Here are ways to make 'the toughest job in the university' a little easier**By GARY A. OLSON

Recently I served on a panel of deans who were asked to discuss our expectations of department chairs. The session was meant to help new chairs understand their role as academic administrators. The panelists exhibited a surprising amount of unanimity on the subject, and I would like to share some of their advice.

It's become a cliché in higher-education literature to assert that the toughest job in the institution is department head, and for good reason: As chair, you have a foot in two very different worlds.

You are the chief advocate for your faculty both to the administration and externally. In that role, you are a kind of prime minister — the first among equals — and a stalwart champion of your department's interests.

Within the department, however, you are the frontline administrator, the supervisor of all personnel, and the primary fiscal agent. In that role, you serve as the chief representative of the institution to your faculty and staff members.

A key to becoming an effective department head is the ability to balance those two very different roles. Ineffective chairs foster an us-versus-them climate within the department: "You'll never guess what they are going to make us do now," such chairs say, where "they" means all university administrators above the department level lumped into one. Adopting that stance may ingratiate you to department members in the short term, but it also demonstrates a lack of leadership.

Effective chairs understand that as part of the institution's administrative team, they will be expected to interpret and even "sell" new initiatives, policies, or procedures to their departments on behalf of the institution. Leadership involves stepping up and accepting that role, even when you personally do not support the new policy.

As someone with a foot in two worlds, you will need to follow proper protocol scrupulously and guide your faculty to do so as well. Nowadays, perhaps more than ever before, professors, staff members, students, and even parents feel empowered to leap over several administrative layers in an attempt to get their way. Why follow the process when you can appeal directly to the provost or president? But violating protocol, or allowing others to do so, disrupts the orderly conduct of university business.

For example, you would not want to be blindsided by one of your faculty members who went directly to the dean to pitch a new program rather than starting with you as the department head. Similarly, if you were to take a departmental initiative first to the provost rather than to your dean, you would risk embarrassing the dean and perhaps losing his or her support.

Following protocol invariably works to your benefit. Maybe the timing is not right for your proposal, and the dean could potentially prevent you from making a strategic error in proposing the plan prematurely. Alternatively, your timing might be perfect, and the dean could be your best advocate. Either way, you win by working through proper channels.

In short, always keep your dean in the loop. And train faculty members in your department to follow basic protocol as well.

An effective department head works closely with the dean and the dean's staff members. The people in the dean's office are there to help you be successful as a chair and should be seen as your greatest support network. Don't isolate yourself and feel that you have to solve every problem on your own: "I don't want to trouble the dean with this one." Most deans would rather be "bothered" early, before a minor brush fire mushrooms into a major conflagration.

A key skill of a good department head is the ability to reserve judgment in a dispute until all parties have weighed in. Everyone who appeals for your support has a compelling story. Unsophisticated administrators assume that the first story they hear is the truth, or that the prevailing narrative about someone or some incident is accurate. Sophisticated administrators wait patiently to hear all sides before arriving at an opinion or rendering a verdict.

As the department's chief administrator, you are expected to maintain the highest standards of ethical behavior. No matter how close you are to certain colleagues in the department, you must do all that you can to avoid showing favoritism when evaluating faculty and staff members, making recommendations about raises, or scheduling courses.

The best department heads develop a healthy balance among their teaching, research, and administrative responsibilities. As the chief academic officer of your department, you should serve as a role model to your faculty — by being a lauded teacher, an active scholar, and a skilled administrator.

Sure, that balance is difficult to effect, and you are not going to have the time to devote to your teaching and research that you used to have. But keeping up your own work as much as possible is an important way to build credibility within the department and beyond.

One department head in my own college consistently teaches more courses than he is required to and recently won a universitywide award for outstanding teaching. Another chair regularly assigns himself huge lecture courses enrolling hundreds of students so he can justify providing course releases to active researchers. A third has garnered global attention for his research, including television documentaries and a lengthy story in *The New Yorker*.

All three have found a way to balance their many duties and to gain the respect of colleagues in the process.

That said, it is important that you not subordinate the management of your department to your teaching or research. Stories abound of department heads who have neglected the nuts and bolts of administration to concentrate on their own scholarship. Balance is the watchword.

Not everything we talked about at our panel will apply in every institutional context. Practices and campus cultures vary, but the issues I summarized here are ones that every chair will face on a daily basis. The job of department head may well be the toughest in the university, but you can make that job considerably harder by ignoring this good advice.

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