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Developing Chairperson Networks at the State System Level

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Kutztown University, where I work, is a member university of the Pennsylvania State System of Higher Education, a system with a notably strong union (the Association of Pennsylvania State and University Faculty, or APSCUF). Relationships between the union management in the system are historically rigid and contentious. After leading my department for five years or so, I became aware that, traditionally, system management was ultimately responsible for the viability of the system and the union was ultimately responsible for the jobs of the faculty. While both parties have deep concern for the quality of education and for students, there is no voice whose first responsibility is the academic programs.

Five years ago, the system developed an annual PASSHE chair conference to train chairs within the system. I attended one of these and found it very instructive, but saw a lot of resistance from chairs to being called in on their time off to attend training sessions. I proposed that chairs take over the conference (I volunteered to lead first) to ensure that the agenda provided rich opportunity for mutual training and sharing of experiences, by and for chairs. Over the past three years, we have honed the idea of a chair-led annual conference that provides training for chairs who work under the same collective bargaining agreement in spite of varying local processes. These conferences also strive to empower chairs by sharing success stories of what is possible, particularly within common disciplines across the system.

As the conferences have matured we have developed a sense of being not only a group of chairs who meet annually, but an organization whose projects and mutual consultation extend throughout the academic year. We have returned to the idea of not only training ourselves but developing a united voice on certain system-wide issues of self-interest. Our network has met more than its share of resistance and its future remains fragile. Simultaneously, chairs are buying into the idea with increasing commitment.

The focus of this conference talk is to share the story of the development of both this network and its purposes. The talk would have the following outline:

- A. Our story: who we are as a system, how the idea of a state-wide chair network emerged, and what our goals are for the coming year (roughly 45 minutes). This will be done conversationally, allowing for questions and clarification among the way.
- B. Participant stories: This is an opportunity to share the nature and arrangement of departments within universities within systems. Here are questions that would stimulate discussion:
 1. Do other similar networks exist? Has this been tried other places (to success or failure)?
 2. What is the potential relationship of chair networks to unions?
 3. How many chairs keep their faculty union membership while being chairs versus leaving their union and joining a chair union?
 4. What are examples of ways chair unions participate in system-wide issues related to academic program?

5. What are the range of ways academic programs are under threat and what are the possibilities of system-wide advocacy by chairs?
6. How is chair training done at various public universities and is there benefit in tackling this at the state level?