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Leading in the Interim: Navigating Interim Chair Appointments

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Presenter Information

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1. **Description of the session (300-500 words):** Include the relevance of the session to chairpersons, presentation focus, recommendations that will be made for chairpersons, and how the audience will be involved.

Leading in the Interim: Navigating temporary permanent department chair spaces

Research suggests that the majority of faculty who enter into permanent department chair/leadership positions do not have preparation or even a clear understanding of the position (Rayburn, 2010; Wolverton, Ackerman, & Hold, 2005), yet the work that chairs do has an “immediate and lasting impact” (Buller, 2012, p.X) for faculty and students. Complicating the lack of preparation for college/university departmental leadership is the unique challenges of the “special aspects of the academic environment such as life-time employment security (tenure), a non-hierarchical management structure for key employees, and the self-motivated nature of the creative work involved in research and teaching” (Gunsalus, 2006, p. 4). Exacerbating these challenges is that chairs often assume the positions on an interim basis—and on very short notice. That is, many interim chairs are quickly appointed, often from the existing department faculty, with the vast majority of whom have no experience serving as a department chair (Rayburn, 2010), and most often without being primed to lead the department.

Interim leaders – those who serve the in-between spaces of permanent administrative appointments – have some unique advantages and disadvantages (Rud, 2004; Rayburn, 2010). An advantage of selecting from within the department is the potential stability – one who knows and understands the culture and climate of the department such that she/he/ze may continue to promote core values, minimize negativity, maintain open communication, and deal with faculty challenges (and challenging faculty). Another advantage of interim leadership is for the faculty’s personal and professional growth, using the interim position as an opportunity to strengthen and solidify leadership skills (Rayburn, 2010). Disadvantages, however, include the higher propensity of one’s decisions being questioned or ignored; that is, decisions made by the interim

chair are “open to more serious scrutiny and supervision by the administrator to whom he or she reports, as well as by the faculty and staff whom he or she leads” (Rudd, 2004, p.46).

Furthermore, given that the appointment is often for one year or less and that climate changes and institutional changes take time, the person’s job and performance are greatly informed and influenced by her/his/hir predecessor (Rud, 2004).

The purpose of this Roundtable discussion is to explore experienced realities of faculty who have served or are currently serving as Interim Department Chairs. The presenters have all served an appointment as interim chair and their experience ranges from serving as interim chair in a newly created department, in two different departments, in another college department, in another college, and in the home department. In this session, we will discuss strategies and techniques for navigating the role of interim chair, and will address and make recommendations on topics including navigating the first few days of the appointment, evaluating faculty (even those who may be on the search committee), handling differences in leadership styles between you and the previous chair, handling having other candidates for the position within the department, and making changes to curriculum or policy. We will also provide time for discussion among participants, some, we suspect, have “interim” experience.

[499 words]

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