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Academic Chairpersons Conference
Proceedings

33rd Academic Chairpersons Conference,
Charleston, SC

Chair Talks

Tim Hatfield
Winona State University

Susan Hatfield
Winona State University

Christian Hansen
Eastern Washington University

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Recommended Citation

Hatfield, Tim; Hatfield, Susan; and Hansen, Christian (2016). "Chair Talks," *Academic Chairpersons Conference Proceedings*. <https://newprairiepress.org/accp/2016/Featured/2>

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Being There for the Department without Losing Yourself

Tim Hatfield's Chairs Talk Academic Chairpersons Conference Charleston, February 5, 2016

Few chairs ever assume that position with a deep understanding of the multiple stresses inherent in the role. This talk will address a number of ways to successfully manage the inevitable stresses that chairs face every day.

Tim Hatfield, Ph.D., is Professor and Chair Emeritus of the Counselor Education Department at Winona State University, Winona, MN. He taught the department's popular stress management course since 1980, and has been a frequent speaker, presenter, and trainer around the country on stress, burnout, wellness, and faculty vitality issues. His work has included a major stress management website that reflects the integration of many of the major concepts that he has introduced to his students, colleagues, and workshop participants over the years. Tim is married to Susan Hatfield and they have four kids aged 22 to 35.

This is going to have to be pretty generic, since I only have 15 minutes to change your lives. I apologize in advance for not being able to help you specifically to alleviate the stress caused by old jerk-face in your department. Often the major stressors for chairs are colleague-centric, and typically they don't teach much about how to deal with that kind of stuff in discipline-specific graduate programs. But just for perspective, one mental health truism is that at any given point in time around 1 in 3 persons are dealing with some pretty significant mental/emotional disorder. So take a moment to look to your left...look to your right...then if they seem OK, it's YOU!

My few minutes are going to look at 5 general issues that can provide some context for your ongoing well-being in your role as chairs. And I'm on notice from my colleagues – especially Susan, not to talk too long and mess up our tight schedule. She has a retractable hook with her, and will not hesitate to use it.

General issue #1:

Stress is a fact of life, but not necessarily an awful thing. Are there any musicians in the room? Violinists? If a string is tuned too tightly – that is, if there is too much stress on it -- it is screechy, and even can break. But if there is too little stress on it, it sounds flat. If there is the right amount of stress on it, the result can be beautiful music.

General issue #2:

So even though people talk like this all the time, the goal is not to eliminate all the stress from your life. It's why my course in Minnesota was called Stress Management, not Stress Elimination. A simple definition of stress is that it is any additional demand made on you. Have any of you had any additional demands made on you lately?! You're even under stress right this moment – attending to me, eating your breakfast, (in some cases) dealing with sleep deprivation, fending off the first barrage of emails from your department this morning. Again, stress is a fact of life.

General issue #3:

There always is more than one way to respond to the inevitable stressors in your life. The stressors will be there; how we respond to them is the critical variable. Psychologist Jack Canfield calls it our respond-sability. We always have a choice, and we can learn more effective ways to manage our stress because we are all educable.

General issue #4:

Not all coping strategies work equally well in all situations, so diversifying your stress skills portfolio can be a helpful thing. We all go with what we know, right? But what we know may not be the best way to cope in a given situation. Which goes back to the importance of our educability.

General Issue #5:

Begin with your coping strengths, then add to your stress skills repertoire. Your strengths are your go-to skills, your default skills. And – full disclosure – there is a ton of information about stress skills on my web site (way more than we have time to go into here). At the risk of losing all the visual learners and smartphone-addicted people in the room, the URL for the site is www.winona.edu/stress. But here is a shorthand version for you to do a quick assessment of your skills:

1. Strengthen yourself (physical activity, nutrition, structured relaxation, smoking cessation)
2. Organize yourself (Christian Hansen will have a lot to say about this: values clarity, relationship skills, time management)
3. Change your mind (the power of perception to free or bind you)
4. Build your support system

What are your go-to skills? That is the place to begin an effective stress management program, with the goal of adding to your stress skills repertoire.

