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Academic Chairpersons Conference
Proceedings

34th Academic Chairpersons Conference, New
Orleans, LA

A Blended Family: Leadership of Multi-Disciplinary Departments

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Recommended Citation

Bonnekennen, Barbara and Patterson, Celia (2017). "A Blended Family: Leadership of Multi-Disciplinary Departments," *Academic Chairpersons Conference Proceedings*. <https://newprairiepress.org/accp/2017/Trends/9>

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A Blended Family: Leadership of Multi-Disciplinary Departments

This session discusses various forms of multi-disciplinary departments and the different challenges upon chairs. This will be of particular relevance to chairs of multi-disciplinary departments and administrators with such departments in their unit. The focus is on the variety of structures and issues that make multi-disciplinary departments different from single-field departments and even each other.

1. Introduction of presenters and brief overview of departmental structures
 - a. The “Catch-All” Department: a department at a small engineering university with one major and a variety of Humanities’ faculty
 - b. The “Merger:” the process and first year of merging two departments into one administrative unit at a medium-size comprehensive
 - c. The “Super Department:” a department with eight unique majors at a medium-sized comprehensive
 - d. Audience Involvement: are there different structures represented in the audience and what are they?
2. Administrative challenges and opportunities: depending on the size of the faculty, a chair may manage the department directly or create a level of coordinators with defined responsibilities
 - a. Chair with direct oversight
 - b. Chair with program coordinators
 - c. Audience involvement: what are other ways in which a department could be managed?
3. Faculty management: the chair’s relationship with the faculty also differs by chair’s characteristics
 - a. The promoted chair (chair’s academic field not historically present in department; chair teaches general education classes; chairship rotates)
 - b. The outside-hire chair (chair’s academic field not present in department; chair’s teaching not important; chairship is a contract position)
 - c. The “pre-merger” chair (chair’s field in one of the merged departments; teaches major courses; chairship is a contract position)
 - d. Audience Involvement: how does the chair’s contract position influence the relationship to the faculty?
4. Relationship with other departments & units, plus student & alumni relations:
 - a. Negotiations for resources (e.g. student credit hours, tenure lines) are in multiples
 - b. Data needs (departmental aggregations are not informative) must be by degree program, not department
 - c. Neither recruitment nor alumni relations can be done for the department; all need to be individualized to academic program
 - d. Audience Involvement: what are some ideas regarding the “all in one” problem?
5. Chair’s care: chairing a multi-disciplinary department offers additional challenges

- a. Chairing programs outside of one's own field of expertise: asking questions and carrying a copy of the course catalog
- b. Emphasis is on administrative responsibilities, not faculty responsibilities
- c. Competition between departmental programs may be intense; chair must be and appear to be neutral

Our recommendations will focus on learned lessons through our own experience and will be in response to issues participants will bring up during the various "Audience Involvement" opportunities at the end of each segment.