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34th Academic Chairpersons Conference, New
Orleans, LA

Taking the Lead: Initiating Change as a New Chairperson

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Recommended Citation

Hlavac, Craig D. (2017). "Taking the Lead: Initiating Change as a New Chairperson," *Academic Chairpersons Conference Proceedings*. <https://newprairiepress.org/accp/2017/Operations/11>

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Title: Taking the Lead: Initiating Change as a New Chairperson

Abstract: Academic department chairpersons are often asked to lead without management training, prior experience, or formal mentorship. These same chairpersons are frequently faced with initiating change in departments that have operated similarly for years – perhaps decades. What is the first step? What should a new chair do to begin the discussion about change without alienating the faculty? This session will provide participants with practical, research-based strategies for defining the roles of the chair position, building trust within the faculty, and beginning a dialogue focused on meaningful change. Opportunities for small-group discussion as well as scenario-based discourse will be included.

Keywords: Leadership, Change, Organization, Data Analysis, Communication

Presentation Topic Theme: Leadership and Management

Target Audience: New Department Chairs

Type of Presentation: Interactive Workshop

Objectives: Attendees of this session will:

- Discuss the various roles of the chair as outlined in the literature
- Review research relevant to leadership for chairpersons
- Develop strategies for building trust and cohesion within the faculty
- Learn about research-based techniques for data analysis at the department level
- Determine appropriate responses to significant data trends
- Discuss methods for creating a sense of urgency toward change
- Review and discuss detailed scenarios that require strong and focused chairperson leadership

Session Description:

The department chairperson is the most prevalent (quasi)administrative position in all of academia. Placed between the ranks of the faculty and the administration, the chairperson is perhaps the most confusing and difficult position in the contemporary university. Chairs (and especially new chairs) are often unsure of their roles, and as such frequently report stress, feelings of being ineffective as a leader and/or manager, and ultimately, displeasure with the position. This session will provide new chairpersons with relevant research and practical strategies for defining the roles of their position, building an atmosphere of trust within the department, and working collaboratively with the faculty to generate meaningful change at the department level.

Specifically, the session will be divided into the following sections:

Part 1 (20 minutes): The session will begin with a review of the common chairperson roles. Research related to the myriad roles of the chair as well as their inherent ambiguities and conflicts will be discussed. Participants will be encouraged to share their thoughts regarding their experiences or concerns about becoming a chairperson.

Part 2 (35 minutes): The session will focus on practical methods for:

- Defining and clarifying the roles of the chair position
- Building trust within the department

- Promoting open communication among the faculty and between the faculty and the administration
- Developing intermediate and long-term strategies for the department
- Analyzing data effectively
- Collaboratively determining the best course of action for a department
- Generating an impetus for change
- Effectively managing change efforts as a chairperson

Networking Break (5-7 minutes)

Part 3 (35 minutes): The session will continue by dividing participants into several small groups. Each group will be given a unique scenario outlining a specific situation in which a new chairperson is in need of leadership advice. Each group will be tasked with reviewing and assessing the scenario and collaboratively developing a list of suggestions. Finally, each group will present their recommendations to the entire group. Focused discussion will be encouraged.

Question and Answer (10 minutes): Participants will have the opportunity to inquire of the presenter or of any of their colleagues regarding session topics.

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