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Orlando, FL

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Recommended Citation

Pinto, Domenick J. (2018). "The Inevitability of Playing Politics as Chair:2018," *Academic Chairpersons Conference Proceedings*. <https://newprairiepress.org/accp/2018/colleagues/2>

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The Inevitability of Playing Politics as Chair: Pros and Cons

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When one thinks of politics in the workplace, especially in the role of academic leadership, images of back-stabbing, insincerity, compromising one's integrity and selling one's colleagues short are often what come to mind. As a chair for 30 years in a department that is rapidly growing, I have continually found that politics is both a necessity and a method of survival that must be navigated through carefully and deliberately.

I continually see the role of chair become increasingly managerial and administrative whereby we are now often intimately involved in strategic planning (departmental, college and university-wide), budget, fundraising, managing conflict, student retention, motivating and encouraging faculty to achieve academic excellence while maintaining scholarship and research, and leading change while maintaining our own standards of excellence in the classroom and in research. Much of this involves contention for resources and having the needs of one's department and faculty heard. Playing politics can be a way to assist a chair in successfully navigating through it all. Although playing politics is often perceived as playing "dirty", it needn't be.

Turf issues have become the norm in many departments on college campuses as universities diversify their programs and try to maintain both a traditional and innovative menu of course offerings.

Declining populations in many cases have forced universities to significantly increase their "base". Recruiting international students, non-traditional students, adding non-traditional courses of study and exploring new delivery methods are all part of the new "entrepreneurial" chair position. All of this takes resources and we understand well that there is a limited reservoir of these resources to draw from.

Exploring interdisciplinary programs, sharing resources and gaining support among faculty from other departments and colleges is a positive way to blend politics into the workplace. Working closely with deans, provosts, other senior administrators and even the president (if possible) are ways to put oneself "out there" and showcase the strength and potential of one's program and faculty. Alas this is not always easy to do. One of the most successful ventures I have undertaken is to take part in faculty governance. This is, to me, one of the most productive and honest political ventures.

My plan for the workshop is provide "what if" scenarios that a chair might face in which politics play either a minor or major role. I intend to have the audience point out and discuss both the advantages and pitfalls of each scenario and offer suggestions as to how to handle each case. Literature references on other political scenarios will also be included.

I will also bring some to light some actual situations in my 30 year experience and ask some volunteers in the audience to role play.

Lastly I intend to summarize what was accomplished during the session and encourage further discussion in informal meetings during the conference for those interested.