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Supporting Department Chair Development: Learnings from the Leadership Cohort

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Supporting Department Chair Development: Learnings from the Leadership Cohort

Background & Relevance

The work of chairing a department requires chairs to be skilled leaders who can deliver quality programs and support faculty to thrive (Gmelch & Miskin, 2004; Sirkis, 2011; Wolverton, Ackerman, & Holt, 2005). Many chairs, however, are underprepared for their role, and their development is often left to trial-and-error (Gmelch, & Buller, 2016; Hecht, 2004). Despite the pressing need for leadership development, many institutions of higher education provide minimal preparation for department chairs (Allard, 2011; Aziz et al., 2005). Eager for support and development, chairs often seek out or create their own leadership development opportunities on campus, given that formal leadership institutes are costly and time-consuming. Some chairs initiate lunch groups, workshops or mentoring cohorts (Detmer-Goebel, 2015; Gmelch, Allen, & Melsa, 2002; Stooksbury, Dalton, Wadlington, & Buckner, 2013), while others seek support from their campus teaching center (Burke et al., 2015; Wright, Cook, & O'Neal, 2010) or experienced chairs (Gmelch & Buller, 2016; Gratto, & Hess, 2015).

Presentation Focus

Though chair preparation is not yet the norm in institutions of higher education, there is a growing body of literature describing various campus efforts to prepare and support department chairs. The proposed best practice presentation shares a model of chair support and development—the Leadership Cohort—that reflects insights from this literature and our experiences.

As advocated in the literature, the Leadership Cohort provides ongoing support and development over the course of a year (Brown, 2001; Gmelch & Buller, 2016). Our monthly curriculum draws from the input of new and experienced leaders (Haden et al., 2016) as well as the leadership development literature. Our meetings include case studies, readings, skill development, and discussions of roles, responsibilities and emerging issues. Drawing on surveys of what chairs value most, the meetings include problem-solving pressing issues, co-mentoring and networking with other mid-level leaders. We focus on issues especially challenging for new leaders, such as conflict management, difficult colleagues, time management and evaluating faculty (Bamberg & Layman, 2004; Brown, 2001; Madsen, Hornsby, Morrow-Jones, Ballam, 2011; Olsen, Ashe, & Clements, 2014). Participants find the diversity of perspectives brought by cross-campus leaders particularly useful (Burke et al., 2015; Detmer-Goebel, 2015).

Presentation Outline, Recommendations & Audience Involvement

The presenters include Cohort facilitators (current and former directors of the campus teaching center), as well as a Cohort participant. Drawing on the literature and Cohort participants' evaluations, the presentation will provide an overview of key features, benefits and challenges of the Leadership Cohort model. We'll also engage participants with case studies and activities used during Cohort meetings [see attachments]. Recommendations for chairs and faculty developers will include: 1) advice for starting a leadership development program on campus; 2) suggested features of leadership development programs; and 3) learnings about managing the challenges of

providing effective leadership development. During the presentation, audience members will be invited to: 1) share their own experiences with and questions about leadership development formats; 2) provide feedback on the Leadership Cohort model; 3) experience sample cohort activities.

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