

July 2004

The Challenges of a New Department Chair: Success Despite Reality

Jeanneine P. Jones
University of North Carolina

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholars.fhsu.edu/alj>



Part of the [Educational Leadership Commons](#), [Higher Education Commons](#), and the [Teacher Education and Professional Development Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Jones, Jeanneine P. (2004) "The Challenges of a New Department Chair: Success Despite Reality," *Academic Leadership: The Online Journal*: Vol. 2: Iss. 3, Article 5.
DOI: 10.58809/ALJ20040701/LMEQ1813
Available at: <https://scholars.fhsu.edu/alj/vol2/iss3/5>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Peer-Reviewed Journals at FHSU Scholars Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in Academic Leadership: The Online Journal by an authorized editor of FHSU Scholars Repository. For more information, please contact ScholarsRepository@fhsu.edu.

Academic Leadership Journal

The Challenges of a New Department Chair: Success Despite Reality

Jeanneine P. Jones, Chair

Department of Middle Grades, Secondary, and K-12 Education

The University of North Carolina at Charlotte

Melinda walked out of the Tuesday Department meeting, quite frankly more discouraged than she'd been in a long time.

What

had happened in there? The fourteen people she'd enjoyed working with more than any others had shot down just about everything she'd planned. Oh sure, that would be gently and politely shot down, but down it went just the same. She'd spent forever working through all of their ideas from the last meeting and, she thought, putting them into a cohesive package. Now what was this all about? It was like she'd come up with the ideas herself. They kept questioning everything she'd said!

Shutting her office door behind her, Melinda resolved to get it back together before her 5:00 class started, speaking of which... She groaned inside her head. What in the world would she tell her students when she didn't have their papers finished for tonight? She mentally kicked herself for spending so much time planning and rehearsing the meeting when she could have done a little less on it and a little more on class tonight. It obviously hadn't mattered about the meeting; she could have spent way less time planning it and still felt sliced and diced by the outcome, huh?

The red light on the phone blinked insistently. Great! Nothing gave her a minute anymore. She punched in her code and listened to the syrupy voice: "Good afternoon, Dr. Petersen. You have 12 unplayed messages." Twelve! Where did THEY come from? She remembered how diligently she'd caught up on her phone calls that morning. She'd left for the meeting with two messages and had now come back an hour and a half later with twelve. "One thing's for sure, I'm not looking at my email," she promised. If the phone was that out of control, she could only imagine the email prospects.

She eyed her class papers tucked inside her grade book, still untouched, as they had been for three days. Her head flashed in on the

agenda for tonight and the chapter she'd still not finished reading. She'd become quite a master at teaching off of half a lesson plan. Someone knocked on the door. Now what? Her shoulders involuntarily dropped a little as she went over to answer it.

"Sorry to interrupt you, Melinda. I know you're probably busy, but I've just got a little problem with one of the students in my class tonight and I want to make you aware of what the situation is about in case he comes to you later. OK? It'll only take a few minutes." Melinda stepped aside to let her colleague in. "Later," she silently promised herself, "later I'm going to figure out another way of running this department instead of it running me, and while I'm at it, I might as well add my own career and my marriage and my kids and my house and... I'll have to think about that tomorrow, though, because I sure don't have time today." She patted her colleague on the back and motioned to a chair. "Come on in and sit down. What's going on?" And with that she launched into the next unplanned item on the day's agenda.

The Situation: Making the Right Ends Meet

New to the role of Department Chair, Melinda certainly found herself in a confusing, and often confused, position. She had literally walked out of her office two months before on a Friday afternoon as a respected faculty member and a model teacher, only to return the next Monday as the Department's leader. With no prior administrative training, and with no clear articulation of her role for the faculty, Melinda quickly found herself in a stressful position. Some things went well, others did not, and very few felt like they were in her full control, as she vacillated between a personal image of part faculty and part administrator. In fact, she had fallen into the unconscious habit of using elaborate strategies to validate her worthiness and mask her insecurities among her faculty colleagues; for example, she often casually mentioned a lack of interest in the job, she regularly lamented that she only taught one class now, and she absolutely never admitted enjoying any part of her new responsibilities (Bennett 1982).

Melinda may have, and indeed should have, recognized this conflicting and stressful behavior pattern in herself, but she simply did not. There are perhaps three reasons for this in her case. First, she moved into this role without a clear definition of its boundaries and responsibilities, and she was hesitant to admit this to her fellow Chairs and the Dean. They believed in her leadership skills and she felt that confessing this confusion would undermine their confidence in her. Second, she never made time for on-going written reflection about her job performance, which would have yielded focused questions, patterns of personal behavior, and general notations about recurring situations. Third, she rarely studied any of the guiding research on the Chair's role in academia, which could have presented her with a much deeper philosophical and practical understanding of her place in the College. Instead, she was asked by her former Chair to apply for the position when he abruptly took a Dean's job in a neighboring state. She was supported in her bid by the faculty, quickly moved through the search committee protocol, and suddenly found herself accepting a role that she thought she'd fully enjoy but quickly realized she knew little about. She still knew little about it.

Melinda's situation is unfortunately more common than not. Very few professors step into the academic Chair's office with a full working definition for the job (Gmelch & Miskin, 1995). Instead, as faculty

members, they work closely enough with their Chairs to assume that they know the major responsibilities of the role. Seeing is certainly not doing, however, and they later find that they have minimal understanding about the actual requirements of the job, its encroachment on their scholarly productivity, and its abrupt invasion into their personal lives. This is very significant because many Chairs, like Melinda, are females who tend to take their positions mid-career and prior to reaching full professorship (Carroll 1990). This doubles the importance of continued attention to personal scholarship, teaching, and service, which in turn, increases their stress levels.

Melinda indeed found herself at a point of total saturation that Tuesday, a feeling that had become a pretty common bookend for most of her days. She greeted her class that night exhausted, armed with good intentions and another round of apologies for their ungraded papers. She walked out three hours later determined to find a better way of running the department, meeting her own professional obligations, and redesigning her battle for a balance between the professional and personal sides of her life.

Research, Action, Reflection: Turning It Around

After struggling to learn her job quietly by herself, Melinda admitted that she was unsure of her role. Finally recognizing that this admission was not only acceptable but also expected of a new Chair, she actively sought advice from a number of sources.

The first came through an obvious avenue, yet one that she had not considered before. She invited the other three Chairs in her college to a long lunch later that week and asked for an advice session over the meal. After rambling around for a bit, they decided to organize their thoughts in terms of

Do's and Don'ts for the New Department Chair. The chart they created was overlaid with fun and camaraderie, but the information it yielded proved invaluable. Melinda decided to tape it to the cover of a large notebook that she intended to use later for running notes and reflection.

Do's and Don'ts for the New Department Chair

Do:	Don't:
<p>1. Have a clear vision for the Department that stems from the vision articulated by the College and University. Use a faculty retreat to move this vision into professional goals for the Department. Have a clear, written plan of action for each goal. It's easy to lose sight of long-range plans in the daily shuffle, so post your goals in a common place where everyone can see them. Check their progress at each Department meeting. Set up a file folder for each one... whatever it takes to keep them first in your long-range</p>	<p>1. Get overwhelmed by all of the microscopic details that don't really matter. You'll pay for that in the end. Instead, carefully prioritize and keep your goals in sight. Do the little things lead to the accomplishment of something bigger? If not, are they really that important? If the answer is still no, don't worry about them.</p>

plans.	
2. Figure out the hidden curriculum of your Department, and then come to fully understand your role within it. Articulate your job clearly and regularly to your faculty. Sincerely invite conversation about it on an on-going basis. This will eliminate small power struggles and behind-doors complaining.	2. Assume that you know everything or even that you have to act like you do. Talk to people! Ask questions! It's OK.
3. Immediately become familiar with university policies; you know, those things you ignored as a faculty member! Guess what? It's now your job to lead the people who are still ignoring them! Also, get to know the University's attorney. You'll need his or her advice on occasion.	3. Let your departmental friendships get in the way of your good judgment. You may make people angry, but they'll respect your decision to put the good of the whole before the wishes of one. Don't jeopardize your professional integrity.
4. Keep up with the simple things like voice mail and email. Getting behind with that stuff will overload you, set a bad example for faculty, make students think you're unresponsive, and keep you feeling frazzled.	4. Give in to students (or faculty!) just because they cry or yell. It's a lot like effective parenting. Be consistent and firm, yet understanding and supportive.
5. Meet deadlines head on. A good tip for keeping some structure is to chunk each project into about three parts. Have a separate deadline for each noted on your calendar. Plan way ahead if the faculty is involved because their input will take a week longer than you thought.	5. Bend the rules...ever. For example, as soon as you hedge a bit on a GPA requirement, students will pour out of the woodwork, waiting in line for you to do the same for them. Stay very strict about those written policies! You're better off walking a thin line. Besides, it's your job now.
6. Work tenaciously for the recognition of faculty and staff who perform well. This will add to their confidence levels, inspire them to keep up the productivity, and increase your respect among Department members. A couple of easy ideas for doing this include a faculty showcase or bulletin board located in a	6. Drag the entire office home with you. Blurring those lines will burn you out faster than you can imagine. It will really take discipline, but try to work at work and relax at home. Modeling this work ethic is important. Getting highly organized will really help. Clean out everything, set up a system of deadlines, color

<p>prominent place within the Department which features recent publications, presentations, or other accomplishments. Also, try a one-page Department newsletter with a catchy title. Faculty can make contributions to it and you can share accomplishments, deadlines, and progress toward Department goals here. Neither takes a great deal of your time and both add significantly to your mission.</p>	<p>code your papers, make files for each day of the week and use them for things that absolutely must be accomplished, sort through the papers on your desk once a week, cook extra meals on the weekend, whatever it takes... but stay organized and respect your personal life. You'll need it to survive the demands of your professional one.</p>
<p>7. Try hard for the win-win in conflict resolution situations. Always gather all of your evidence before you utter a single word to anyone, though, and make your decisions and recommendations public only after a period of reflection about your decision. Never jump to conclusions.</p>	<p>7. Try to do it all yourself. Many people in the Department know many things, so give them a chance to show you how smart they are. Do you have reliable program coordinators? Office staff? Graduate assistants? Delegate whenever possible and then rely on a monitoring system. For example, record the assignment in a notebook and check on it after a reasonable period of time has passed. Don't think about it in between! Trust your faculty.</p>
<p>8. Support, support, support. Mentor, mentor, mentor.</p> <p>Remember: Your job is to make everybody else look good.</p>	<p>8. Get sidetracked by the negative. It will bring your attitude down, which will then cause the morale around you to slide. Instead, try to focus on the positive while being realistic. Negative energy is counterproductive. If necessary, pinpoint the source of the problem yourself and address it.</p>
<p>9. Network regularly with other chairs and mentors. It's fun to combine that with a social setting like lunch or a conference. These peers can give you feedback and support when it really counts. They can also give you reactions that would be typical of their faculty, share examples of their reports and projects, and give you feedback on hard situations.</p>	<p>9. Try to be someone you're not. "To thine own self be true..." is still your best motto.</p>
<p>10. Ask for a regular, private meeting time with</p>	<p>10. Commit yourself to a rigorous schedule of</p>

<p>the Dean if it's not offered. Keep a folder filled with running questions, scenarios, and problems. Record notes on the advice offered about each. Turn the notes into a checklist of sorts that will lead to the successful addressing of each concern.</p>	<p>publishing, conference presentations, and consulting. That alone will wear you down and will, more often than not, undermine your strong reputation. You have to give up something when you add more, and the more you've just added is significant. Plan to shave off some of your prior activities to make time for the additional responsibilities. Maintain a moderate schedule, and you'll find it easy to return to your former level of productivity later.</p>
<p>11. Spend the first hour and a half of the day in your office with the door shut at least three times a week. Use this for your own writing, organizing the week, grading papers, and generally catching up on your personal work before you move on to that of the Department. Make this a habit you won't break!</p>	<p>11. Be constantly doing something. Even though you're swamped, try to give faculty and staff the impression that you've always got time for them. It's better to have a structured closed/open door policy than to always find that people are uncomfortable for interrupting you.</p>
<p>12. Figure out everything in the office from the budget to the process for hiring student workers. This will help you appreciate the role of your office manager or secretary while streamlining and monitoring the daily routines.</p>	<p>12. Be caught off guard. Even though you're not directly involved in everything, you're still ultimately responsible for it.</p>

Lunch done and her notes duly posted, Melinda implemented Step Two. She spent the afternoon sequestered in the University library, where she searched the shelf and internet holdings for professional readings that would help her better understand her new role. This actually yielded more than she expected, so she spent a couple of hours working through a few of the most promising books and articles from the depths of a cushy chair. Lunch with her peers and some library time had provided valuable information that Melinda knew would catapult her into an immediate plan of action. The conversation had been helpful and the break needed. Things were looking up already!

The next logical step for Melinda featured a Professional Development Plan, something that she'd read about in one of the books she'd gotten from the library (Seagren, Creswell, & Wheeler, 1993). She was the kind of person who both enjoyed and needed the act of committing her thoughts and goals to paper, so this was ideal for her.

Before she could begin that, however, she revised a list of major job responsibilities from her personal perspective (Gmelch & Miskin, 1995; Petty, 2001), and developed a grid that she could work from:

Action:	Are we doing this well?	If not, whose job is it?	If mine, does it need a Personal Development Plan?
Create a positive work environment			
Set and accomplish long-term Department goals			
Recruit and select faculty			
Provide feedback to faculty			
Represent Department to administration and the field			
Hire, monitor, and support part time instructors			
Evaluate faculty performance			
Encourage faculty research and publication			
Enable professional development of faculty and staff			
Update curriculum, courses, and programs as needed			
Schedule classes			
Advise and counsel students			
Help students register			
Recruit students			
Prepare for accreditation			

Remain current within my academic discipline			
Develop relationships with business and community groups			
Manage facilities and equipment			
Monitor/maintain the Department budget			
Constantly solicit ideas that lead to the betterment of the Department and its members			

Melinda eliminated the routine things, like helping students with registration, and moved these instead to her yearly calendar. She also noted the items that should be delegated out to others, like program reviews; these things she would simply schedule, monitor, and participate in. She thought through the actions that seemed to be working and if they truly were, she simply made a note of that. She then rank-ordered the remainder of the list that required a Professional Development Plan.

She decided to revise the plan she'd found in the library, which resulted in a form that was simple to complete and easy to monitor.

Professional Development Plan (PDP)

Goal: _____

Target Date for Accomplishment: _____

What will I do? How will I evaluate it? What value is added?

After designing a Professional Development Plan for each of her necessary action items, Melinda moved on to her final step, which centered on the habit of regular, written reflection in a dedicated notebook. This resource would serve as a holding ground for at least four sources of critical information: her colleagues' Do's and Don'ts, notes from her research readings, her Professional Development Plans, and her own reflections on both those processes and the day's events in general. She felt that with on-going analysis, these notes and comments would reveal patterns and situations that would spawn other plans and other ways of thinking, processing, and preparing. She felt confident that her increased organization would lead her to a better understanding of her job, a clearer relationship with her faculty, and a heightened sense of pride, joy, and confidence in her career.

References and Interesting Resources: Defining Your Own Research Base

Bennett, J.B. (1982). Ambiguity and abrupt transitions in the department chairperson's role.

Educational Record 63(4), 53-56.

Bensimon, Ward, and Sanders. (2000). Department chairs' role in developing new faculty into teachers and scholars. MA: Anker Publishing Company, Inc.

Carroll, J. (1990). Career paths of department chairs: A national perspective.

Research

in Higher Education, 32(6), 669-688.

Gmelch, W.H. and Miskin, V.D. (1995). Chairing an academic department. CA: Sage Publications.

Petty, M.E. (2001). Academic leadership in Ivy Tech State College: Academic chairs' tasks and job challenges.

Academic Leadership.Org: The Online Journal, 1(4), 1-16.

VN:R_U [1.9.11_1134]