



## **Department Chair Online Resource Center**

### **Leading University-wide Change: Defining New Roles for the Department Chair**

Douglas J. Murray. 2000. "Leading University-wide Change: Defining New Roles for the Department Chair." *The Department Chair* (summer). Reprinted with permission from [Anker Publishing Company, Inc.](#)

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As America's institutions of higher learning enter the new century, they are confronted by a series of dichotomous challenges entailing unity and diversity on the one hand and tradition and change on the other. Much has been written about these challenges, and common to these writings is the call for new initiatives, vision, and even a new paradigm with which to address them. However, with the possible exception of their role in intradepartmental change, there has been little discussion of the responsibility of the academic department head or chair to participate in and even lead the effort. This may in large part be due to the fact that in the century just past, a number of department chairs had essentially abrogated their responsibility for university-wide planning and direction. In the years that preceded the twentieth century, it was frequently the corporate body of department chairs that led the effort and made the decisions that developed and shaped America's colleges and universities. That sense of corporateness must be renewed in the new century. It is time that the chasms that have developed between academic department heads and deans, provosts, and university presidents be bridged.

Administrators have become frustrated at departmental parochialism, and departments have become antagonistic toward administrative meddling. Bunker mentalities have developed to the point that one dean at a prominent American college lamented to a national conference that he was uncertain that he would be accepted back into his old department because he, after all, had gone over to the other side when accepting the position of dean.

This author believes that it is time to redefine the role of department chairs, to make them as responsible for the college or university as they are for their departments. They must lead the effort to change the existing mindset that focuses inward rather than outward. Make no mistake, this call for change is not novel. Daniel James Rowley, the chair of the department of management at the University of Northern Colorado, wrote:

"The role of a chair in fueling conflict or in rechanneling energy . . . can be vital in finding methods of redistributing resources fairly and humanely, in helping to shape the entire campus's strategic direction, and in developing multidisciplinary bridges that will create alliances and provide greater learning and research opportunities . . . it

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will be important for chairs and deans to work together to tie budgets and new hires to 21st century needs. This may require breaking older molds, traditions, relationships, and patterns of activities" (1999, pp. 4–5).

## **CURRICULUM AS THE KEY TO CHAIR LEADERSHIP**

The curriculum and its development are the media through which department heads and chairs can lead change and become visionaries at the university level, not just resource managers at the department level. The curriculum is the cornerstone of an academic institution's mission, the criterion with which to establish and evaluate its objectives, and the standard against which to direct and then assess change. Correspondingly, because the institution's budgets, resources, facilities, and entire infrastructure are impacted by the mission and the curriculum that supports it, curriculum development entails university-level participation. Only through a dynamic, integrative process that incorporates all of the participants in the academic life of the university can meaningful curriculum development occur. Such development becomes a foundation upon which to address challenges faced by the institution at large—and is the centerpiece of a comprehensive framework for strategic planning. While strategic planning has many definitions, it can be best characterized as a decision-making process for "meeting organizational challenges and opportunities in a dynamic and often volatile environment that translates a corporate vision into a plan entailing all echelons of an organization" (Butts, 1998). Imbedded in that definition is a set of critical organizing principles that, if followed, ensure the success of any curriculum development effort and provide the mechanism for meaningful department chair leadership of it.

## **ORGANIZING PRINCIPLES**

The critical organizing principles for developing a framework for strategic planning in curriculum development include: 1) top-down guidance and support from the university president, provost, and college deans; 2) design flexibility with respect to process, organization, and execution; 3) unambiguously stated objectives that provide criteria against which to assess each phase in the planning effort; 4) clear understanding by all participants of the institution's purpose, vision, and mission; 5) a mechanism to determine the need for change and capable of assessing the results; and 6) an organization and process that cuts across traditional bureaucratic lines (read department/discipline/administration) incorporating the talents of all directly responsible for realizing the university's mission.

While each of the six principles is equally important, it is the last one that offers department chairs, working together as a corporate entity, the opportunity to lead curriculum change and, in so doing, university reform. A good example of this is found in two recent initiatives in strategic curriculum planning by the Air Force Academy, the first to develop an integrated approach to curriculum development and the second to draft a long-term plan to map the academy's direction in the 21st century (Murray, 2000). In both efforts, the chairs of each of the academy's 20 academic departments, four of whom hold positions equivalent to civilian university deans, became integral members of process action teams and university-wide functional analysis organs that conducted each phase of the strategic planning effort. Each individual chair became part of a university-wide faculty consciousness rather than the representative of an individual department's interest. The academy superintendent, the equivalent of the university president, and each of the major subordinate agency heads held these bodies directly accountable for the process and the output of it. While this dual effort is still ongoing, it serves as a model that other institutions might emulate if they want to avoid the following prognosis.

James L. Fisher, in *Reflections on Transformational Leadership* (1994), notes:

"Governing boards have been at a loss as to what to do, and when they act, they almost always worsen conditions. Why? Because invariably they include faculty in their governance deliberations, and the most intransigent group in any organization is bound to be that which is invested in keeping it as it is—in this case, the faculty. The result? Excepting a precious few, colleges and universities in the United States are effectively paralyzed."

If America's institutions of higher learning adopt a framework for strategic planning in which the faculty, specifically the department chairs or heads, are not intransigent obstacles to change, but the agents of change and the leaders of it, this outcome can be avoided. Effective university reform will result.

***Douglas J. Murray is head of the Department of Political Science at United States Air Force Academy.***