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How to survive your first year as department chair (essay)

Submitted by Kerry Ann Rockquemore on December 7, 2016 - 3:00am

Dear Kerry Ann,

I started my first semester as department chair this fall. While I had an afternoon of training over the summer, it didn't prepare me for the job. I've already made a ton of mistakes, my colleagues are treating me differently and I feel extremely isolated. I haven't written anything this semester, and I'm kicking myself for agreeing to a three-year term.

I honestly don't know how I'm going to make it through the rest of the academic year. I've tried reaching out to other new chairs on my campus, but when we get together we just end up complaining about how awful the job is (and that makes me feel even worse).

I don't know what I'm doing and why this is so hard. I need to do something over this break to make things better or figure out how to quit. Please tell me there's something I can do to make things better.

Sincerely,

Chair in Despair

Dear Chair,

I'm sorry to hear you're having a difficult transition into the role of department chair, but I'm glad you are reaching out for help. Being a new chair is difficult under the best of circumstances, and you've become chair during a tumultuous political moment that makes the job even harder. While it's little consolation, you're not the only [chair with inadequate training](#) [1], nor are you alone in experiencing elevated stress this semester.

Before you think about quitting, let's first think about what you would need to be successful in this new role. Let me suggest a few strategies for moving forward.

Develop a new mentor map. Whenever we transition from one role to another (in your case from faculty member to administrator) it's a whole new ball game. There are new rules (written and unwritten), you need a different set of skills to be successful, and you need a whole new set of mentors, sponsors, support and community. In other words, it's perfectly normal for you have a [wide range of needs](#) [2] during your transition, including chair-specific professional development, emotional support, a positive community of peers, accountability, role models, sponsors, access to opportunities and substantive feedback on your performance.

I don't imagine that your campus will overhaul their training for new chairs in the near future, so it's smart to take matters into your own hands. I encourage you to start by identifying your specific needs (e.g., navigating responsibility without authority) and starting to brainstorm ways to get those needs met. If you have no idea where to begin, there's something clarifying about filling out a [mentor map](#) [3], because it forces you to name your specific needs and specify where you are (or could be) getting those needs met. Feel free to adapt a standard mentor map for your needs as a department chair.

Seek external training. It sounds as if your campus provided a basic nuts-and-bolts overview of your new role, but that hasn't been sufficient to meet your professional development needs. You may want to consider external professional development opportunities that are geared toward department chairs, such as [ACE's Leadership Academy for Department Chairs](#) [4]. Also, many disciplines have a "chairs conference" or training at their annual meetings that provide excellent information and networking. If you're unable to attend an external conference, also consider [online training opportunities](#) [5] for skill development.

If an external training isn't possible for you, there are also plenty of instructive books about how to be a great department chair, such as [The Essential Department Chair](#) [6], [The Department Chair Primer](#) [7], [Chairing an Academic Department](#) [8] and [The College Administrator's Survival Guide](#) [9]. And if you find that your immediate needs are more specific, you can also identify some more targeted resources. Whether you are struggling with [time management](#) [10], [difficult conversations](#) [11], [negotiation](#) [12] or [working with "problem" faculty members](#) [13], almost every challenge has been studied and written about, so you can learn the best practices.

Create a mastermind. I would also be remiss if I didn't share my favorite strategy for transitioning into a new role: creating a mastermind group. It's a simple, free and powerful tool that will provide you with emotional support, community and accountability. All you have to do is find a small group of positive peers (department chairs, either on or off the campus) who are willing to commit to meeting weekly for the purpose of tackling challenges and supporting one another in solving problems.

Here's how it works:

- You invite a group of peers (three or four other department chairs, working in a similar type of institution).
- The group picks a weekly one-hour meeting time that every member agrees to hold sacred in their calendar (no canceling and no interruptions).
- You meet at the designated time (face-to-face, by conference call or Google Hangout).
- Every person gets an equivalent amount of time to present a challenge and let the group brainstorm on how to resolve it. Start the meeting with a quick round of wins and end with everyone clearly stating their concrete step forward.

Notice I did not say get together for a regular session of "[ain't it awful](#) [14]" -- you already know that doesn't work and leaves you feeling disempowered. Instead, a well-constructed mastermind group can be an incredible source of consistent, external problem solving and an instant supportive community. I've participated in a weekly mastermind group for the past four years (with a peer group of presidents) and I can personally attest to the transformative power of this support structure.

Go find your campus mentors. No matter what, you are going to need to have on-campus mentors who are seasoned department chairs (or have been effective chairs in the recent past). Start taking a fresh look around to see who is particularly savvy in this role, who has influence, who seems

healthy and happy, and who gets things done for their unit. Start asking those people for short, targeted conversations on specific topics where you've seen them excel.

Additionally, you will need to start meeting and building relationships with a wide range of administrators and staff members on your campus in order to get tactical assistance, break through the bureaucracy and help move your agenda forward. You may want to ask yourself:

- How well do I know the various members of my dean's and provost's team?
- Do I know whom to call for things like budget support, human resource issues, legal concerns, student services, faculty development, grant support and/or IT services?
- Am I in regular conversation with my department's previous chair? If not, why not?
- Who are (or could be) my chair role models on campus?

Answering those questions honestly will help you to identify where you need to focus your networking and relationship-building activities in the short term and will help you tremendously on a daily basis.

Be gentle with yourself. More than anything, I encourage you to be gentle with yourself as you go through this difficult transition process from faculty member to administrator. You're allowed to make mistakes while you learn. It's normal for it to take a full year for you to get comfortable as chair. And you are more than capable of fulfilling the requirements of this role.

As always, stressful times require more (not less) self-care ^[15]. So give yourself permission to do whatever you need to prioritize your health and well-being. It may mean seeing a therapist during your transition. It may mean scheduling some regular bodywork to physically destress. Or it may mean starting a regular exercise routine. Do whatever you need to do to take time for you -- away from the campus -- to keep things in perspective ^[16].

Of course, you can always make the choice to quit the position. But I suspect that you agreed to be chair because you believed you could make a difference by steering your department in a positive direction. Yes, it's harder than you imagined and you didn't receive the training you needed to be successful. But since you've made the commitment, why not arm yourself with the resources you need to grow into what can be an exciting new leadership role?

Warmly,

Kerry Ann Rockquemore, Ph.D.

President, National Center for Faculty Development & Diversity ^[17]

P.S. It's time for my annual holiday break. You can continue to send me letters at DearKerryAnn@FacultyDiversity.org ^[18] -- it will just take me a bit longer to get to them.

Source URL: <https://www.insidehighered.com/advice/2016/12/07/how-survive-your-first-year-department-chair-essay?width=775&height=500&iframe=true>

Links:

[1] <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2016/12/01/new-study-suggests-training-department-chairs-woefully-inadequate-most-institutions>

[2] <https://www.insidehighered.com/advice/2011/11/28/essay-need-tenured-faculty-members-have-mentoring>

[3] <http://bit.ly/1Ltk97u>

[4] <http://www.acenet.edu/leadership/programs/Pages/Leadership-Academy-for-Dept-Chairs.aspx>

[5] <http://www.facultydiversity.org/?deptchairintense>

[6] https://www.amazon.com/Essential-Department-Chair-Comprehensive-Reference/dp/1118123743/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1480895089&sr=8-1&keywords=The+Essential+Department+Chair

[7] https://www.amazon.com/Department-Chair-Primer-Chairs-Difference/dp/111807744X/ref=pd_bxgy_14_img_2?_encoding=UTF8&pd_rd_j=111807744X&pd_rd_r=1KHHXN8PVF3G30Q5W1N5&pd_rd_w=2AjSB&pd_rd_wg=8Qrm5&psc=1&refRID=1KHHXN8PVF3G30Q5W

[8] https://www.amazon.com/Chairing-Academic-Department-Walter-Gmelch/dp/1891859528/ref=pd_bxgy_14_img_2?_encoding=UTF8&pd_j=1891859528&pd_r=QFTTADX3CW24JWT6GR8G&pd_w=1jPF&pd_wg=UTVNu&psc=1&refRID=QFTTADX3CW24JWT6C

[9] https://www.amazon.com/College-Administrators-Survival-Guide/dp/0674023153/ref=pd_bxgy_14_img_3?_encoding=UTF8&pd_j=0674023153&pd_r=F7JHCVEJ1NAQTS8AZT0K&pd_w=WcDC5&pd_wg=lfpqJ&psc=1&refRID=F7JHCVEJ1NAQTS8AZT0

[10] https://www.amazon.com/Management-Department-Chairs-Christian-Hansen/dp/0470769017/ref=sr_1_1?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1480895390&sr=1-1&keywords=time+management+for+department+chairs

[11] https://www.amazon.com/Crucial-Conversations-Talking-Stakes-Second/dp/0071771328/ref=sr_1_1?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1480895454&sr=1-1&keywords=crucial+conversations

[12] https://www.amazon.com/Getting-Yes-Negotiating-Agreement-Without/dp/0143118757/ref=sr_1_1?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1480895493&sr=1-1&keywords=Getting+to+Yes%3A+Negotiating+Agreement+Without+Giving+In

[13] https://www.amazon.com/Working-Problem-Faculty-Six-Step-Department/dp/1118242386/ref=pd_bxgy_14_img_3?_encoding=UTF8&pd_j=1118242386&pd_r=T8EZCE629J2ENXFCZXP&pd_w=TuzDI&pd_wg=gfd5M&psc=1&refRID=T8EZCE629J2ENXFCZXP

[14] <https://www.insidehighered.com/advice/2016/04/27/how-keep-support-group-positive-essay>

[15] <https://www.insidehighered.com/advice/2015/05/06/essay-how-faculty-members-can-keep-focused-amid-so-much-disturbing-news>

[16] <https://www.insidehighered.com/advice/2016/05/11/how-avoid-overinvestment-your-job-essay>

[17] <http://www.FacultyDiversity.org>

[18] <mailto:DearKerryAnn@FacultyDiversity.org>

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