Managing special issues.

back to table of contents

Department chairs perform many routine tasks daily (e.g., running meetings, supervising staff members, etc.). However, there are other duties (e.g., unanticipated tasks with immediate deadlines, unexpected change in faculty/staff employment, faculty/staff illnesses, etc.) that infrequently occur and that require special care. While it is very possible that you may not have encountered similar situations before as chair, you can still be prepared to recognize special issues and to address these issues in a reasonable manner.

What to do

- **Reflect before you react.** Gather pertinent information about the special issue, but resist the urge to make a snap decision or to provide a hasty response (with either the spoken or written word). Sometimes it is best to just "listen", and then reflect on what you have learned.
- **Keep calm and positive.** Unexpected tasks/issues/emergencies will arise. How one behaves in potentially stressful situations may say as much about us as leaders as what we ultimately do to address the situation.
- **Read and understand the academic handbook and other university policies.** This is not particularly scintillating reading, but may make you aware if there already is a policy in place to address your particular situation. Ask questions if you don't completely understand university policies or procedures (few of us probably do for every situation), as the special issue may fall in an area that requires interpretation.
- **Seek advice.** In particular, talk to staff in Academic Affairs, Human Resources, and/or other offices around campus. In addition, you also might talk with an experienced colleague (perhaps a former department chair) with whom you feel comfortable discussing the situation. *Before discussing the issue with anyone, you first should consider legal, confidentiality, and privacy concerns as well as any university policies that might apply.*
- **Develop a plan to address the issue.** Devise a means of addressing the special issue (as necessary). In doing so, it may be important to revisit some/all of the previous "What to do" steps. It is essential to identify what outcomes are desired, what steps will lead to those outcomes, and what deadlines/time constraints exist. By keeping these key components in mind, your resolution is likely to be more effective.
- **Prepare for the unexpected.** It is virtually impossible to anticipate and prepare for every possible scenario that you might encounter. However, you might learn about possible types of situations by listening to other chairs (or colleagues) discuss special issues. Be careful to realize that their approaches might not be correct or even applicable to your situation (each issue may have its own unique circumstances).

Organizing and transferring information to the next chair.

[back to table of contents](#)

At DePauw, the role of department chair changes on a routine basis between faculty members (typically chairs have a maximum of two consecutive terms of three years each). New department chairs are recommended to the VPAA by the Committee on Faculty after interviewing departmental faculty members. In order to maintain continuity and to facilitate a smooth transition to the new incoming chair, the outgoing chair should strive to develop an organizational file system early in their term that can serve as a library of examples/reference for the new incoming chair. In addition to physical files (digital and/or paper), new chairs also would likely benefit from mentoring sessions with the previous chair (either formally on a bi-weekly/ monthly basis during the first few semesters or informally as the need arises).

Record keeping

- **Organize early, organize often.** As you assume the role of chair, make a regular practice of keeping copies of memos, reports, department meeting minutes, emails, budgets, curriculum changes, etc. (basically any paperwork/files related to your role as chair). You might use major headings in the deptchairpedia as organizational headings that might be further subdivided chronologically by date. These materials not only serve as a record of departmental business, but also provide examples for future reports, proposals, etc.
- **Dedicate a file cabinet and a computer folder for chair business.** When you retain all of the materials described above related to your work as chair, it becomes easy to "drown" in the clutter and the sheer number of items. The simplest approach to keeping materials associated with your business as chair organized is to dedicate a file cabinet for paperwork and a folder on your office computer for digital files. Create labeled (heading & date) sub-folders, so that you can readily file (and retrieve) the materials quickly and efficiently.
- **Correspond and/or follow-up by email and cc yourself.** It is easy to respond orally to questions at meetings or in the hallway. However, it is important to establish a paper trail that serves as a record of any important aspects of the conversations (e.g., decisions, follow-ups, timelines, etc.). As described above, create a labeled (heading & date) folder system for emails, so that they can be easily filed and retrieved.
- **Handle confidential material carefully.** Because the role of department chair changes on a routine basis, some materials (e.g., records regarding hiring decisions, minutes from departmental personnel committees, correspondence regarding disciplinary actions for a departmental faculty member, etc.) may be inappropriate for a new chair to see (especially if the materials are about them). Such files should be retained by the chair at that time, and not passed on to a permanent repository for future chairs.

Mentoring sessions

- **Offer to set up formal mentoring/discussion sessions with the new chair during the transitional period.** For a few months after the incoming chair has assumed the position, it may be helpful to organize bi-weekly/monthly mentoring sessions to discuss current issues and upcoming tasks. These sessions might be timed to occur as the new chair is preparing to work on a particular task (e.g., setting up the schedule of classes, writing a major report/proposal, etc.). The idea is to give the new chair an idea of what you did in that situation and why you did it.
- **Plan to be available for Q&A sessions on an informal basis.** The new chair is going to have questions. At first, you may think that you still are chair...but the questions will get fewer and farther between. Your receptiveness to questions will help the new chair feel comfortable seeking your advice during their first semester or two as chair.
- **Know when to "let go".** Don't be too overbearing or intrusive in the work of your successor.

Resolving issues between department faculty members.

[back to table of contents]

Unless you are a department of one, there will likely be multiple personalities in the department that will occasionally come into conflict. You will need to judge when those conflicts are minor skirmishes that should be ignored and when the interpersonal conflict needs attention or intervention.

Understanding the issues

- **Develop a sense of your department's history and attitude toward resolution of intra-departmental faculty member conflicts.** Current conflicts can be reflections of long past grudges or injured feelings. Build upon any successes in your department's history of resolving conflict, and avoid chronic missteps that can create even more resentment.

- **Be an unbiased and impartial mediator.** All faculty members deserve to be treated fairly in any resolution process. You cannot take sides, but you should act decisively in the best interests of the department and the students.

- **Gather the necessary facts, but don't delay action that may allow the problem to fester and grow.** Timely intervention is often the key. Many large problems can often be minimized by early attention.

- **Focus on the broad goals of a healthy and functional department.** Acknowledge when the conflict presents a barrier to the fundamental goals of the department, undergraduate liberal arts education, or student welfare, and work to resolve the issue quickly so as to minimize any negative effects to the department and its faculty, staff, and students.

- **Take special care with conflicts between faculty colleagues also involve students.** In some cases the conflict between the department members will draw students into the conflict. Chairs should seek to minimize the impact the conflict has on students and should not seek to use the student as part of the resolution process.

Meeting with colleagues

- **Clearly state the goals of any meeting you have with your colleagues in conflict.** It may help to focus the goals on the good of the department or the welfare of the students. It may also be necessary to establish ground rules for the conversation and consider including the faculty colleagues in establishing these ground rules.

- **Seek to build consensus.** The goal is not universal agreement; but rather, the goal should be a resolution that is broadly acceptable and equitable. You should consider asking the faculty members in conflict to first identify the problem, then to articulate desirable outcomes to be achieved by any resolutions they propose.

- **Recognize the diversity and validity of opinions expressed.** Colleagues expect to have their opinions respected. When those opinions focus on ideas, a diversity of opinion can be a very beneficial thing.

- **Document the conversation by taking notes and distribute a copy of the notes (or a summary) to everyone involved, so that each has a record of the discussion and the resolution (if any) that was reached.**

Meeting with colleagues

- **Accept the presentation of ideas, but challenge any personal attacks.** It is acceptable and desirable for colleagues to challenge each other on the ideas they present or represent. Vigorous challenges to the ideas are a healthy part of democratic citizenship and governance. What cannot be permitted is challenges directed at the person or their inferred motives. Attacks on personality never resolve the issue at hand.

- **Consult the available resources for starting difficult conversations.** There is no-one-size- fits-all solution for resolving interpersonal conflicts, but there are some excellent resources (see links below) that can help you and your colleagues start moving in the right direction.

Working with difficult colleagues.

back to table of contents

Whatever difficult situation you find yourself in, it will most certainly be unique with regard to the time, place, and circumstance. While there is no magic solution to resolve difficult situations or to work with a difficult colleagues, there are some basic principles that should provide you with a helpful place to start. Carefully assessing the situation and placing it in the department's historical context is the first step. Only then are you ready to address the difficult colleague directly.

Assessing the situation

- **Identify the nature and scope of any problem you plan to address with a department colleague.** Difficulties with department colleagues come in an infinite variety of forms. Be aware that a long-held grudge or a deep-seated sense of feeling underappreciated may exist, but try to focus on the current problem at hand, while remaining sensitive to preexisting extenuating circumstances.

- **Develop a sense of your department's history and attitude toward dealing with difficult department members.** Current tensions or issues can be reflections of long past grudges or injured feelings. Build upon any successes in your department's history of dealing with difficult colleagues and avoid chronic missteps that can create even more resentment. Be patient when a long neglected issue falls to you to resolve.

- **Acknowledge your personal feelings and opinions, but strive to approach the situation in an unbiased manner.** Although you may have your own personal feelings, perceptions, and opinions, as chair you have the responsibility to deal with the situation in a fair and professional manner.

- **Focus on departmental goals.** Strive to address the situation with the health of the department and the academic enterprise in mind. You are unlikely to change attitudes, but you might successfully modify behaviors. Articulate the departmental goals and explain what changes in behavior are necessary to align with them.

Meeting with a difficult colleague

- **Schedule a meeting with the colleague.** Do not assume the problem will go away on its own.

- **Consult the "5 Steps for Tackling Tough Conversations."**

- **Acknowledge the benefits that the difficult colleague brings to the department.** Try to create and foster situations that maximize their benefits. You are working with someone that has gone through the hiring and review process. If they are at DePauw, it is most likely because there is something valuable they contribute to the university.

- **Focus on ideas and not on personalities or motivations.** Focus on the common goals you and the difficult colleague share and resist efforts to blame other department colleagues.

- **Seek to build consensus, not capitulation.** Remember your job is not to bend the difficult colleague to your will; rather, your job is to address a situation that impedes the healthy and efficient functioning of your department. Don't assume your answers are the only right answers. Work toward a resolution that you and the difficult colleague agree upon.

Meeting with a difficult colleague

- **Document the conversation and steps you have taken regarding the difficult colleague.** Share a summary of the conversation in writing with the colleague. Keep a good record of the efforts that you have made in trying to resolve issues with a difficult colleague.

- **Let it go.** Once you have made a good faith effort to address issues with a difficult colleague, you have done your job. Move on.