

# Advice for Department Chairs: Six Steps for Building a Healthy Department

Ongoing problems within a department can have profound consequences, including difficulty in recruiting and retaining faculty and students, loss of funding, and even program termination. While the health of a department cannot be the responsibility of a single person, the department chair plays a pivotal role in getting departments out of trouble and maintaining a healthy, positive direction.



Marjorie Chan, professor of geology and geophysics at the University of Utah, has seen her share of thriving to struggling departments from multiple disciplines during her seven years as department chair. She reviewed and worked with other departments that she considers dysfunctional—where faculty members were angry at and avoided each other and often skipped department meetings. This experience has given her some useful insights into managing the health of academic departments. She offers the following advice to department chairs:

**1. Set strategic goals.** When faculty members become chairs because it's their turn, they often come in as caretakers rather than visionary leaders, making it unlikely that the department will make significant

progress. "It's very important that the chair has a vision that is shared with the entire faculty. You have to prioritize and focus on a couple of things that you want to accomplish as chair. That will help set you on a path," Chan says. Being a visionary leader means acknowledging problems and setting specific goals and objectives in an open manner. "In most departments, it helps to lead by team-building consensus as opposed to a dictatorial approach," Chan says. Some decisions a chair makes are inevitably unpopular but necessary. Having open communication about decisions helps faculty understand how the decision was made. They may not agree with the outcome, but they should feel that the process was fair.

## **2. Encourage faculty**

**contributions.** "It is extremely valuable to acknowledge the participation of the faculty. Thanking them is a huge part of having a strong department because a lot of times there's no budget for monetary rewards. But the one thing that we really appreciate and look for is just somebody acknowledging and thanking us for what we did. A lot of [faculty members] go above and beyond the call of duty, and if those efforts are just ignored, faculty members might say [to themselves], 'Why should I keep doing this? Nobody cares what I'm doing.' And that's when I think people start going off in their own directions," Chan says.

## **3. Build on individual faculty members' strengths and minimize their weaknesses.**

Each faculty member has a unique

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set of strengths and weaknesses. Rather than one size fits all, it's better to consider how each person can contribute in ways that provide the most benefit to the department. "Take time to pay attention to what is going on, and try to be sensitive to how to approach people on their own level. Not everybody is going to be a star who hits the ball out of the park each time. You still need people on the team who can get the base hit or people who can play multiple positions even though they're not the star. Realizing what people's strengths and weaknesses are and trying to maximize those strengths and minimize those weaknesses will be a positive move forward that builds community," Chan says. Individuals' strengths and interests can change over time, so it may be necessary to renegotiate expectations. Try to accommodate these individual faculty differences so that evaluation of teaching, scholarship, and service are relevant to what each faculty member contributes to the department. "Often in the academic setting, we just expect everybody to excel in all three of those [realms], and it's just not realistic. I think some of the problems develop because there isn't a lot of flexibility in our system, and it's difficult for faculty members to excel at it all," Chan says.

#### **4. Work closely with alumni, friends, and advisory boards.**

Alumni are a valuable asset to a department, and they need to be kept abreast of what is happening in the department through visits, newsletters and annual reports. "When alumni feel positively about the department, they want to give

back, and then good things happen," Chan says. "If the department ignores its constituency and lacks communication with alumni, it will be much more difficult to get support to move the department forward." Because they are familiar with the department and yet are outside of it, advisory boards can provide valuable advice and insights. They can also help build endowments and address particular projects or goals.

**5. Engage students.** Current students are also a source of department vitality. Chan recommends using the student workforce to mutual advantage. "An engaged student body is really the lifeblood of the department," Chan says. "We wouldn't have a department without students. If you can figure out a way to mobilize and engage the students, that can help turn a department around. When the students are involved, they learn responsibility and feel that what they're doing is a contribution to the department. They feel invested in the department and its goals, and that can help move things forward."

#### **6. Look beyond the department.**

Chan recommends that departments take an outward and future-oriented view—focusing on where a department and its impact on the community ought to be and how to get there. Different components might include how to raise visibility, extend outreach, bring in more students, and build community. Bringing in guest lecturers, alumni, or others can provide new and different perspectives on research and teaching methods. Strong outside support from alumni and

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friends can help raise the stature of the department in the eyes of the administration.

Collectively, all these points can help build a strong, healthy department that is vibrant and thriving. A positive work environment builds on itself and will perpetuate long-lasting returns that will help ensure a solid departmental future.

– Rob Kelly in *Academic Leadership*