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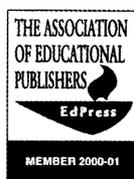
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Guest Editorial

**On Being a Department
Chairperson**

The department chair is the most difficult and arguably the most important position in an educational institution (Bennett & Figuli 1990). On the one hand you are a member of the faculty with many of the rights and responsibilities of a faculty member, but on the other hand, you are an administrator with the dual task of bringing concerns from the department to the attention of higher administration and bringing the directives of administration back to the faculty. Several years ago I decided the time was right for me to make this move as a means of facilitating some of the academic changes I favored. Below are some of my observations and suggestions concerning the leadership skills that will help to make your tenure as chairperson successful. Leadership is a function not only of the chair, but also of the faculty, students and staff, the goals of the department, and the overall situation. It is an active process with many unpredictable variables; it is challenging and can be very rewarding.

In my case assuming the chairship involved moving to a new institution, but for you it may mean taking over the chair of a department of which you are already a member. In either case, the most important initial skill is to know the resources that are available to you. Resources are many faceted. They include the people in the department, the skills they contribute, and challenges they present. They also include the physical and financial resources that are available (or not) for use. It is likely that in any department there are more resources available than is obvious to an observer. For instance, a surprising amount of information can be learned about a department by reading the c.v.'s of the faculty. There are the obvious history and achievements but there are also evidences of less tangible qualities. What kinds of activities are important? Are there people strengths within the local community (department, college, locality)? Are there wider recognitions within the state, region or country? During an interview, ask each of the people with whom you meet for their impressions of the strengths and weaknesses of the department. Ask the faculty for their perception of support from higher administration and question administrators for their perception of the department's niche in the college. It is critical for you to know the resources that are available to you, and those that are not, so as to develop a realistic agenda for improvement.

A part of knowing your resources is communicating about them with others. Effective communication can be a difficult and time consuming skill for a department chair. It involves receiving and storing a variety of information moving up from the department and down from higher administration. It involves filtering and interpreting that information and then passing it on. As important as anything is for members of the department to know what other members are doing. A regular department newsletter has been invaluable to me in sharing the range of faculty activities within the department—helping them to “know their resources.” All of my faculty focus heavily on teaching, but some are more innovative than others and spend considerable additional time developing new skills and approaches. Others are more interested in research and scholarship and so devote their “outside” time to these endeavors. Still others do an exemplary job of service, thus representing the department in many areas and freeing colleagues of some service responsibilities. The unfortunate tendency is for faculty to focus on their own interests and disproportionately recognize those characteristics in their colleagues with similar interests. The newsletter highlights all types of contributions: <http://www.emporia.edu/biosci/newsbiol.htm>.

The newsletter has also been a very useful tool in helping to make the administration more aware of the valuable resources it has in our department! Regular department meetings are also important in providing

a forum for faculty, students and staff to freely voice their concerns and opinions about issues of importance to the department. In this regard it is critical to respect all opinions, including dissension, in this open forum. As a result, personal frustrations can be expressed and dealt with, rather than built up. From the position of chair, perhaps the most important component of good communication is being a good listener. Careful listening can provide the key to understanding the source of disagreements and differences within the department. At the very least, it sends a message to the department members that their opinions are important and you are willing to consider them.

A significant result of effective communication is that needs and goals of the department can be identified and actions developed to meet those needs. Departments evolve as personnel and conditions change; the main "condition" is our students. Our primary job is to facilitate student learning. Regardless of how good a job we are doing right now, there is always room for improvement. It is reassuring to know what we are doing well, but more important is to recognize where we can improve. This can be a challenging task! There is an adage: "If it's not broken, don't fix it!" The key is to decide if a "fix up," or at least a "tune up," is needed. Effective formative assessment strategies are the key to making this decision. In the eyes of some faculty, assessment is the new "fad" that has enamored educators and accreditors. There is certainly room for abuse if assessment is limited to the gathering of multiple kinds of data. However, if the data gathered is used to: 1) identify needs, 2) effect changes and 3) assess the efficacy of the changes made, then assessment is not only valuable but essential.

Implicit in the assessment strategy used to identify the needs is the process of planning for change. Change is frequently difficult to accomplish. The inertia of custom must be overcome. Furthermore, change can be threatening to individuals and to groups. For this reason it is critical to have open communication and dialogue. I frequently attempt to facilitate change by bringing forward a proposal to stimulate discussions. Although it is my proposal, I must be willing to accept changes and modifications as group deliberation

continues. I also strive to share leadership at this point. Often I will meet with departmental committees in the early stages of discussion, or at the request of the committee, and participate *ex officio*. But usually, I will let the committee work on its own and my task is merely to keep progress occurring.

Sharing the leadership, delegating, can be one of the most frustrating aspects of being a chair. It often seems easier to simply take charge and do what has to be done. But it is my experience that in the long run, subtle influence is more effective. Certainly there are times when I must simply tell the department that certain things have to be done, especially when a deadline must be met. However, for long term decisions affecting the goals and direction of the department, sharing leadership is most effective. Keep communication open and give praise where it is deserved. Make suggestions, when appropriate, but be careful that the "helping hand" is not perceived as criticism. The single best advice is to lead by example.

Encouraging communication and feedback within the department makes it much easier to accomplish the task of representing the department to higher administration. Knowing the resources and needs of the department, and understanding the goals it is striving to reach allows one to make decisions for the department, with confidence, when called upon to do so. In turn, having the strong backing of the department provides you with greater leverage in negotiating with administration. The support of the department is the true source of power for an effective department chair.

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Reference

Bennett, J.B. & Figuli, D.J. (1990). *Enhancing Departmental Leadership: The Roles of the Chairperson*. New York: Macmillan Publishing Co.

Letters

Teaching How To Answer "Why" Questions About Biology Lauded

Dear Editor:

I want to compliment you on an excellent article in the January 2001 issue of *ABT*. As an instructor and teaching strategies committee member, I use similar guided inquiry-based pedagogy, especially for my introductory biology courses. I would add, however, that inquiry-oriented science instruction engages the students in active learning, problem solving, cooperative learning and other instructional methods that motivate students to learn biology courses as well as

other subject areas; thus, enabling students to look at the world from multiple perspectives.

Yours Sincerely,

Grace Ekpenyong
Baltimore, Maryland

Clarification: The flower in the February 2001 cover photo was Torch Ginger (*Phaemeria magnifica*), native to the East Indies, not Red Ginger (*Alpina purpurata*). We would like to thank NABT's Hawaii Representative, Randyll Warehime, Iolani School, Honolulu, for bringing this to our attention.