It’s common to hear that being an academic chair is the hardest job on campus. For newer chairs, the job is often almost totally overwhelming. Although we can’t solve every problem you will face as chair, we do believe that the simple tips offered in this article will help you move from surviving to thriving as a chair. This is a practical article. We aren’t offering complex theories or literature-driven discussion. Instead, we want to give you several concrete strategies you can put directly into practice.

Collectively, the two of us have fifteen years of experience serving as department chair. That’s thirty total semesters of navigating both the small- and the large-scale issues that regularly surface in the work of the department chair. Although we both recognize ample room to continue to grow in our jobs, we also have amassed a store of experience that helps us manage the day-to-day issues that chairs regularly face. This article shares practical tips that we have learned over time. In fact, the central idea behind this piece comes from a simple but important question: What do we know now that we wished we had known when we started as chair?

The chair’s job is made challenging by one very clear problem: the work regular faculty do is vastly different from the work the chair does. We both remember finishing up a semester in the faculty jobs we had done well for many years. Then, upon returning to our respective departments in August, we stepped into our new roles of department chair. Outwardly, the position seems similar to regular faculty work, but in actuality the job requires entirely new competencies and perspectives. The burden of a new chair is further increased because in almost all cases no formal training is provided to incoming chairs. Instead, the outgoing chair offers some advice and encouragement, hands over a messy pile of documents and notes, wishes you good luck, and, with a big smile on his face, backs out of the office as quickly as possible.

Strategies for Chairing Success

We’ve both weathered a lot of storms as chairs. Although the job of chair is complex and often shifting, there are some basic elements that remain consistent. By applying the ideas detailed here, you can successfully navigate many of the common challenges you will face as chair.

Strategy 1: Managing email. When you become a chair, one of the things that changes drastically is the volume and type of email that comes into your inbox. Without a deliberate strategy for managing email, the newer chair can quickly become buried in the daily deluge. For this reason, we recommend that chairs take the following eight concrete steps to manage email:

1. Turn off email alerts. Email alerts serve no useful purpose and can instead only distract you from other tasks. After all, as a chair you don’t need an alert to tell you when an email comes in because you can safely assume that email is always coming in.

2. Check email only at the start and end of the day and work for set amounts of time, from thirty minutes to one hour. Otherwise, entire days can get eaten up with
email, preventing the chair from attending to other more pressing and important tasks.

3. Limit your replies to five lines or less. If you find yourself writing more than five lines, that’s a good indication that the issue is too complicated for an email. You can’t solve big problems over email. Whenever an email starts to get too long, switch to a different kind of response: phone call, face-to-face meeting, referral to a committee, and so on. Also, given the high volume of email that chairs have to process on a daily basis, you do not have time to write lengthy emails anyway. The shorter, the better. This also helps model short email writing for your colleagues, although unfortunately many of them will be slow to get the hint.

4. Create email templates for commonly sent messages. In this way the chair needs only to paste in the relevant reply rather than rewriting the same information over and over. As soon as you find yourself writing the same basic email twice, you need to file it away as a template.

5. Don’t use your email inbox as a to-do list. If you do, you have to keep rereading emails and searching through disorganized materials. The volume of emails chairs receive is simply too huge to make your inbox work as a to-do list. Pull tasks out and list them somewhere else so that you can remember them.

6. Use a simple filing system for your email. With so much email coming in all the time, you do not have the time to file it inside folders inside other folders inside other folders. We try to use ten folders or fewer to store everything. One of the best strategies is to label your folders by year, such as “2018 Chair.” Whenever you are debating whether to file an email, see step seven.

7. Delete! Delete! Delete! You simply don’t need nearly as many old emails as you might imagine. No one is likely to ever ask for them. Just let them go.

8. When you aren’t deleting emails, deal with the rest by using one of the following: reply if you can do it in five lines or less, forward if you can send it to someone else to worry about, wait on it because, surprisingly, some chair problems solve themselves without your interference, list as a to-do item and delete the email, and when in doubt delete!

Strategy 2: Responding to complaints. For chairs, handling complaints is a regular feature of the job. Whether complaints come from students, colleagues, staff, or administrators, it’s important for the chair to have a concrete strategy for responding. For the purposes of tracking and documentation, as chair it is necessary that you take and keep on file notes about any complaints that you receive. In our experience, a surprisingly high number of the people who come to our offices to complain are mostly looking for an opportunity to vent. The act of taking notes serves to convey both your attentiveness to the complaint and your personal investment in seeking a solution. When the person making the complaint sees you writing, they know they are being heard. We often take our notes using an old-fashioned piece of paper and a pen. In our experience, writing longhand conveys for many people that we are investing carefully in the details of the issue.

The other key premise for responding to complaints is for the newer chair to resist the urge to take on the emotional baggage that the person making the complaint is carrying. Early on, we both often felt like it was our responsibility to leap into action whenever someone complained. Now, though, once the person has finished describing the situation, we like to respond with tested phrases like “What I hear you saying is . . .” and “The reason you are upset is that . . .” We follow these statements with a careful recounting from our notes. Very often, this action resolves the complaint entirely because it meets the person’s fundamental need to feel heard. In a surprising number of cases, being heard is even more important to people than having you actually solve the problem, especially if the problem can’t be solved very easily.

When handling complaints, chairs must also remember to ask for whatever they need in order to respond to the complaint. As chair, you might need more time, continued patience, other peoples’ input, or the like, so ask for what you need. It’s critical that newer chairs not view all complaints as matters that must be solved on the spot. We encourage you to take your time. Many of the people who complain to the chair are hoping that we will assume full responsibility for resolving their problems, but we already have plenty of other problems on our desks. In addition, people often come with a complaint that has been brewing for a long time, so you really can’t solve it immediately, and it can be a mistake if you try to go too fast. Although this does not mean that we do not get involved heavily in some complaints, it does mean that we are selective in taking on the problems that inevitably show up at our doors. Very often the response that is warranted is to help the complainer think through ways they can resolve the issue. Talk things over with the person directly. Say, “What do you think you can do to help reach some closure on this issue?” Chairs can help with many problems, but we can’t solve most problems alone.

Strategy 3: Maintaining harmony. One of the unstated duties of effective chairs is that they will assume some responsibility for maintaining a harmonious work environment. One need not spend long in most academic departments to appreciate the Sisyphean scope of such a task. Newer chairs can make a difference in overall department harmony by adopting the four following actions:

• Apologize for situations that lead to difficulty for others. This is not the same as owning responsibility for all difficulties. Rather, a chair can take steps toward maintaining or re-instilling harmony with remarks like “I’m sorry that this situation isn’t better right now” or “As chair I want to apologize for this institutional difficulty arising.” Of course, delivering such an apology requires the chair to convey the message in an appropriate, trustworthy tone. A surprising number of situations are mollified with a sincere apology.

• Thank people. Each Friday afternoon we each send out a batch of thank-you notes to people within and beyond the department. Sometimes they’re simple notes recognizing a contribution to department or university life. Other times they’re more personal acknowledgments of the way an individual handled a difficult situation. In either case, these quick, handwritten notes go a long way toward encouraging the sort of good behavior that allows chairs and their colleagues to thrive. You also should thank people in department-wide emails and list people you are thanking on department agendas.

• Recognize colleagues’ achievements publicly. The start of department meetings is a good time to do this. The simple truth is that most people feel good when their hard work garners...
attention from their colleagues.

• Get out of the office. Spend a small part of each day walking through your department talking to people. A simple walk around the halls lets you connect briefly with colleagues and listen to what is going on. We learn many important things from these walks and, just as important, the walks let people see us being present to help. We have both been surprised by how many times a simple stroll around the department has created an opening for learning about a small problem before it could grow into a big one. We have also found this brief chance to interact informally with faculty of all levels to be an invaluable part of the relationship building that is at the heart of all productive departments. And, best of all, if you are out walking and talking, you are free from checking your email (so leave your cell phone in your office when you go!).

Looking Ahead

Being a department chair can be one of the most rewarding jobs on campus. By implementing these strategies on a regular basis, we both feel more able and available to take on the more complicated work that is always at the core of effective chairing. Our hope is that other chairs can add some of these practical tips to their work life and in the process free up time and energy for investing in the fundamental missions of their home departments. Although we cannot promise that the job of chairing an academic department will ever become easy, we do find that a deep store of practical strategies makes the work more enjoyable and productive.

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