



10 Things I Never Knew about Being an Academic Chair

By Tammy Benson, Ed

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My professional goals have always included teaching but never administration. I tended to be a bit judgmental and suspicious of administration. However, after five years in an elementary classroom and 19 years in a university classroom, circumstances led me to take the plunge into higher education administration. Having served as a faculty member at the University of Central Arkansas for some 21 years and being an alumna there, ties of loyalty and service ran deep. It was my duty to take on this new adventure and ensure that I was doing my part to serve our faculty, promote idealistic goals of my university, and make sure that the future of higher education was in good hands. I felt that I could take all that I had learned from a faculty viewpoint and implement the best leadership strategies to be the kind of administrator that all faculty would love!

Armed with all my leadership books, a positive attitude, and advice from respected mentors, I enthusiastically embraced my new position as academic chair. These are a few of the lessons I learned:

1 Never say never. A good leader has to be able to see the whole picture and have a vision for the direction of the department. In a chair's position, you have to consider all perspectives—students, programs, faculty, budget, upper administration—and keep your own principles intact.

2 Not all faculty members are like me. It is our job as chairs to respect the diversity of the faculty, listen to their ideas, and support them as much as possible. When you are able to put aside your own insecurities and really listen to faculty members who see things differently, you can change a culture.

3 The circle of trust should be kept small. Being an extrovert and, quite frankly, an open book, I learned very quickly to be more discreet about what I say. When considering who should be in your leadership team of confidants and advisors, start with no one and add to your circle gradually.

4 Everyone loves you until you have to tell them no. A good leader knows that saying no is part of the job. You have to keep the vision in mind, keep priorities in place, and let your principles guide you.

5 Transparency can be highly overrated. Sometimes you just have to do what you think is right and let people criticize you when they don't have all the information. If you continually base your decisions on what is best for the unit, trust will follow.

6 Being an effective chair can easily become a 24/7 job; don't let it. Make time for family, hobbies, and outside interests without guilt. Allow time for reflection.

7 Faculty members in your department are like students in your classroom or even your own children. You can care for them very much, and you can love them, but it's best that they not be your friends. Considering the difficult decisions that you have to make as chair, keep your perspective on what makes a positive culture in your department.

8 Never become dependent on the money or the power in administration. For the first time in 25 years, I updated my teacher's license and provided documentation of required professional development hours. This is important because now I have another option, which helps me maintain my integrity and sanity and enables me to make decisions that positively affect our programs, students, and faculty.

9 Use the job to advocate for students, faculty, and programs. Set goals and fight the establishment to make things better for the people you serve. Ask why things are done the way they're done and look for ways to improve processes.

10 Never ask your faculty to work harder than you do. Model good working practices by being the faculty member you want your faculty to be. Teach, research, and stay abreast of the latest changes in your field.

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