

AC 2007-871: ORIENTATION FOR NEW DEPARTMENT HEADS

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Orientation for New Department Heads

Abstract

The position of department head is incredibly important to any university. Because many new department heads are faculty members who have little to no leadership or management experience, some orientation training is warranted. This paper investigates the topics that should be covered in such training. The results are based on a survey of existing civil engineering department heads and an examination of the training already available through universities and professional societies.

I. Introduction

Every civil engineering program is overseen by a department head who almost always moves to this position from faculty member status. Some serve for a three year rotating tour, while others can remain in the position for many years. The department head position carries a number of new and important responsibilities that can include budgeting, counseling, assigning resources, accreditation preparation, publicity, hiring new faculty members, mentoring of staff, and interfacing with the Dean, Provost and President. Lately, the responsibilities have extended to fundraising, strategic planning, alumni relations, teaching and research mentoring, and industry partnerships. The job requires skill at human relations, organization, and leadership. All of these responsibilities represent a big change from the teaching, research, and service activities expected of most faculty members. This paper will address the need for specialized training for this position, a list of the most important topics that need to be covered as determined by a survey of current civil engineering department heads, and the current availability of such training. The subject of department head training is being considered by both the American Society of Civil Engineers (ASCE) Department Head Council Executive Committee and the ASCE Committee on Faculty Development.

II. Department Head Responsibilities

The role of department head can be both inherently rewarding and intensely frustrating, all on the same day. The job will vary somewhat from institution to institution, but the core responsibilities are fairly common. The department chair is a colleague and peer with the faculty members in a department, but is expected to interface and support the policies of the Dean and the University level administration. It is the highest position where an individual still controls curriculum, teaches courses, and has daily contact with students in the classroom. While many descriptions of department head duties exist, Graham and Benoit¹ divided the responsibilities into four broad categories: administrative, leadership, interpersonal, and resource development. Table 1 uses these categories and their sub-responsibilities to indicate where a new department head might be experienced, have some experience or be inexperienced. The table is not universal as some faculty members will gain experience through service in student activities, university committees, or professional societies prior to assuming duties as chair. A department head is also expected to continue teaching, research and university service activities and also be a role model, mentor, and leader in those areas.

Because a department head is such an important position and there are so many critical areas in which a new department head lacks experience, the necessity for training in these areas becomes apparent. There are several venues available for such training. Universities can provide their own training. A typical university has a sufficient number of department heads to make such training worthwhile and that training can be tailored to support the specific policies, capabilities and priorities of that individual university. Professional societies can prepare more general training that will be applicable for all department heads. The ASCE Committee on Faculty Development is currently considering such an initiative and the ASCE Department Head Council Executive Committee is creating a four hour department head workshop prior to the start of the annual Civil Engineering Department Head conference in May 2007.

Department Head Role	Experienced	Some Experience	Inexperienced
Administrative roles			
Fiscal overseer		x	
Schedule coordinator			x
Report generator		x	
Staff supervisor			x
Interpersonal roles			
Counselor		x	
Coach		x	
Mediator			x
Climate regulator			x
Leadership roles			
Visionary			x
Internal advocate		x	
Internal intermediary		x	
External liaison		x	
Curriculum leader		x	
Role model	x		
Resource development roles			
Faculty recruiter			x
Faculty mentor		x	
Faculty evaluator			x
Resource warrior			x

Table 1. An assessment of the relative experience a new department head possesses in each of the major department head roles

III. What should a workshop include?

A survey was sent to all Civil Engineering Department Heads² asking what training most needed to be included in a department head training workshop. The question was open-ended rather than multiple choice. There were 24 responses and the feedback was sorted into the general

categories cited below. The topics are listed in order of priority along with the number of responses for each topic

Most popular topics (number of responses)

Program assessment/ ABET preparation	(11)
Conflict resolution / faculty relations	(10)
Recruiting faculty / executing a good search	(8)
Goal setting / strategic planning	(8)
Fund raising / alumni relations	(7)
Budgeting	(5)
Junior faculty mentoring	(5)
Senior faculty motivation (post tenure)	(4)

Multiple response (2 or 3 responses)

- Time management
- Faculty evaluations
- Effective communication
- Diversity
- Obtaining resources
- Promotion and tenure
- Public relations / advertising
- Interface with Dean and higher ups
- Leadership styles
- Creating a positive / productive environment
- Using advisory boards
- Allocation / delegation of work load

Single response topics

- Curriculum issues
- Trends in civil engineering education
- Effective use of support staff
- Conducting an effective meeting
- Creating a newsletter

A majority of the most essential topics involved human relations and motivating people. With the exception of assessment and accreditation, the biggest challenges seem to lie with hiring, counseling, motivating, mentoring, and leading people.

IV. How department heads learn their jobs

The survey queried current department heads asking, “How did you learn what was required to be a department head?” The most common response was either “trial by fire” or “on the job training”. The other responses included

- Asking questions to the Dean and university-level administrative staff
- Mentoring from fellow department heads
- Observing the previous department head
- Reading books, articles, and university handbooks
- Previous service as program director or interim department head
- Professional leadership experience outside academia (industry/military)
- University workshop
- Workshop or literature from professional society
- Management and leadership courses
- Administrative or service activities at department or college level

V. Existing university programs

Finally, the survey asked “Does your institution offer anything to assist or instruct incoming department heads on their duties?” Of the 24 responses, exactly half indicated that their university offers no training to incoming department heads. The other half indicated that their university hosts a workshop, pays for external training, or at least administers a mentoring program. Not surprisingly, the agendas are quite similar for those universities that conduct internal workshops. Every agenda dedicates a large portion of available time to the management, counseling and leadership of people. Budgets, legal issues and planning are also commonly included.

The University of Evansville has a fall conference where the Vice President for Academic Affairs hosts a new department head workshop. Incoming chairs meet with a panel of seasoned chairs to discuss a variety of issues that include faculty evaluations, budgeting, course schedules, and communication skills².

The University of Minnesota offers a seven part orientation series for new department heads. It consists of a half day seminar prior to the beginning of school and six dinner meetings throughout the academic year. The topics include the roles, responsibilities and priorities of a new department head; creating a productive environment for department colleagues; assessing faculty resources; promoting excellence and diversity in academic departments; and managing financial resources, legal issues, and human resources².

The University of Texas provides a two day workshop for department heads and organized research units directors. Topics include leadership, budget, the graduate school, teaching, academic accountability, research management, legal issues, human resource policies, effective working relationships, campus diversity, community engagement, disruption in the workplace, and evaluating and counseling faculty members. The budgeting portion included an overview of the university budget, revenues and expenditures, formula funding, tuition, operating accounts, internal audits, statement of accounts, and financial best practices. The academic accountability session covered accreditation, faculty credentialing, institutional effectiveness, faculty workloads, course/instructor surveys, compacts, and accountability at state level. The legal

issues seminar considered such topics as where to go for advice and assistance, employee relations, complaints and grievances, student issues, safety issues, crisis management, open records/public information, internet issues, compliance program litigation, publications, training, and professional activity.³

Three years ago, Virginia Tech started a two-day workshop that provided training for new department heads and even provided options for swimming and golf⁴. The university offers monthly department head breakfasts throughout the year as an opportunity for follow-up and continuous communication. The workshop topics included

- Creating a healthy departmental climate
- University strategic plan overview
- Where the money comes from and what funds are available at the university level
- Assessing and improving the departmental climate: managing your departmental operations
- Potpourri of new tools: stopping the tenure clock, modified duties, reconciliation and mediation
- Options for handling conflicts, dual career, assistance program, leadership development opportunities
- How to work with your dean
- Moving from a faculty member to a departmental leadership role
- Communication
- Dealing with difficult people
- Working effectively with staff
- Planning for future programs

The University of California at Berkeley offers a two-day workshop where new chairs (and deans) go to the first day and all chairs and deans attend the second day.⁵ The sessions on the first day are academic personnel and case preparation, search training, being an effective chair, unparalleled challenges in the workplace, and challenges at the unit level. The second day topics include managing conflict effectively, academic personnel case matters, conducting effective meetings, tools for emergency preparedness and disaster recovery, faculty welfare matters, fundraising, staff performance and department effectiveness, and skills for exercising leadership in an academic setting.

University of Tennessee at Knoxville has a retreat and a department head handbook for new chairs. The chapters in the handbook are organizational charts, master calendar, message from the chancellor, strategic plan, introduction to academic leadership, fiscal administration of the academic department, faculty, administrative staff and support personnel, academic matters and the student, department infrastructure, department role in development, forms and templates, and supplemental readings.⁶

The Provost for the University of Utah hosts a one-day workshop for new department heads and the VP for Academic Affairs follows up with monthly meetings⁷. The agenda for the workshop includes curriculum administration, human resources, staff and benefits issues, equal opportunity, development, stress management, information technology, budgets and financial stewardship, faculty hiring, promotion and tenure, and conflict resolution.

The Academic Personnel Office at California Polytechnic State University provides a notebook and an hour and a half orientation session for incoming department heads. The notebook contains sections on many university-specific topics such as the strategic plan, faculty contract, academic recruitments, sabbaticals, evaluation of department heads, student evaluation of faculty, fee waivers, part time faculty, early retirement, faculty salary schedule and sexual harassment⁸. Cal Poly is part of the larger California State University system, which also provides a centralized department head workshop that focuses on issues that are more general. This one-day workshop includes presentations on the chairperson in transition; contract overview; conflict, communication, and collegiality; faculty recruitment, retention, and renewal; legal issues; and student success.⁹

VI. Professional society programs

While The American Society of Engineering Education does not currently offer department head training and ASCE is currently discussing it, several other professional societies are already providing it. The American Council on Education (ACE) is the most prominent offering both workshops and a website with material to assist department heads.

The ACE offers several workshops per year at different locations for division and department chairs and deans that focus on departmental leadership. Five sessions are offered at each workshop and are taken from the following topics:¹⁰

- Budgeting in the New Millennium
- Conflict Management
- Decision-Making Strategies
- Enhancing Department Resources Through Fund Raising
- Evaluating College Teaching
- Leadership and Team Building
- Legal Issues for Chairs
- Navigating the Whitewaters of Departmental Change
- Shaping Mission and Leading Change
- Using Data to Guide Departmental Planning and Decision-Making
- Working with the Dean

The ACE website¹¹ offers material to assist department heads in the areas of the chair as leader, the chair and faculty, resource management, legal issues, what's new, and announcements. Under each section, the website offers articles, book references and other websites that will assist department heads. Most articles are written by veteran department heads or deans. For department heads at universities that do not offer training, the website also features links to other universities that provide department head training.

Additionally, the Women in Engineering Leadership Institute (WELI) and the Society of Women Engineers (SWE) have joined forces to provide a leadership workshop for women engineering faculty poised to assume leadership positions in colleges and universities. The agenda includes legal issues, leadership skills, NSF advancement programs, a deans panel and an academic life panel¹².

VII. Conclusions

The department head position remains one of the most challenging and important jobs at any university. The department head is faced with a myriad of issues that range from curriculum development to hiring faculty and from managing resources to establishing a vision. Those hired to perform this critical job often have no experience in many of these important areas. While current department heads manage to learn their jobs through a variety of means, orientation training is extremely useful. Some universities currently offer it and several of the professional societies are assisting as well. For those looking to start some department head training, this article will hopefully help suggest the types of topics that might be included based on existing training programs and a survey of current civil engineering department heads.

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