

Creating an Academic Department Vision: Processes, Challenges, Rewards

<p>Costas Spirou Provost & Vice President for Academic Affairs Georgia College & State University Milledgeville, GA</p>	<p>Steve McLaughlin Provost & Executive Vice President for Academic Affairs Georgia Institute of Technology Atlanta, GA</p>
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Department chairs are called upon to serve their institution in a variety of ways. Some of the responsibilities and expectations include advocating for faculty and students, overseeing budgets, supporting faculty development and evaluations, organizing course schedules while overseeing the curriculum, among many others. All of these expectations produce a work environment that emphasizes continuous problem solving, dealing with personnel issues and conflict, and tackling bureaucratic structures. As a result, the position becomes about the overall management of the day-to-day affairs of the academic unit.

This presentation focuses broadly on chair leadership by sharing insights about the circumstances and importance of developing a department vision. Creating a department vision is a challenging but highly rewarding and potentially an extremely impactful task. Some of the positives of this work includes crafting a strategic direction that is outcomes oriented; generating additional resources for the unit; improving faculty satisfaction and injecting clarity to the faculty evaluation process; and even contributing to student success. Additionally, developing a department vision strengthens chair leadership and furthers institutional advancement. But there are also complexities associated with this activity. These include reaching agreement on a viable direction; ensuring inclusivity; and addressing a general tendency to be ambitious and overpromise.

The session offers perspectives on key elements associated with the creation of a department vision with special emphasis on avoiding potential pitfalls. These include the importance of leading with a collaborative stance and a position of influence; considering thematic directions when leading a unit comprised with multiple disciplines; and understanding the critical role that faculty, staff, and students can play in this process. A portion of the time (20-25 minutes) will be allocated for the participants to break out into groups twice. The first time (5-7 minutes) to consider (1) potential challenges, and (2) potential benefits when developing a unit vision. The second time (5-7 minutes) to reflect and identify (1) institutional initiatives, and/or (2) opportunities with which they could align a possible vision. The groups will then be invited to share their observations with all participants (5-8 minutes), with the remaining time spent on discussion, including a Q & A.

While institutions of higher education regularly pursue university/college wide strategic planning and visioning exercises, departments are less likely to follow a similar direction. Shifting the focus from day-to-day managing to visioning can provide department chairs an opportunity to create and cultivate a faculty culture that is collaborative, purposeful, and engaging. Furthermore, this work can strengthen the role of the chair while contributing to building a satisfying work place environment.