Transparency and Communication for Chairing a Healthy Department

The Dean of our College has famously said: "Your Department is an anomaly; I've never seen an English Department that was so free of drama and tension." In this presentation, participants will be invited to learn about and discuss how that environment was created and has been maintained and fostered across more than 20 years of service and with two, different Chairs. Specific points to be addressed will include issues of committee composition, scheduling, resolving conflicts, handling difficult faculty, budget works, effective relations across College and University offices, communicating expectations of evaluation and tenuring, supporting faculty initiative, and delegating responsibilities. Participants will be invited to discuss their own experiences with these issues as the presentation proceeds.

Importantly, and as the list above shows, the reality of a healthy and productive department is not an accident, but is in fact the result of ongoing, systematic work to involve all faculty and staff in the Department—including adjuncts and especially including junior faculty—in all decision-making in the Department. From the most mundane to the most significant issues across the academic unit, decision-making must include everyone within the all legal limits while respecting all individuals' rights to privacy and opinions. Certainly, the public or visible duties of department chairs may appear to include any number of routine decisions requiring little to no input from faculty. Yet, for a healthy department with engaged and participatory faculty who feel valued and respected, every decision must be the result of open and inquiring communication among the affected parties. From the bureaucratically mundane task of reviewing and forwarding time sheets of wage-employees to the tension-fraught task of reviewing and evaluating faculty performance, the department Chair must seek counsel and information (often behind the scenes) from the faculty and staff so that when a decision becomes public or results in policy or administrative action, no one is surprised.

Ultimately, when a Chair consults with faculty at every step, and faculty know their voices have been heard, a department or school or college functions more smoothly, more efficiently, and is better positioned to cope with and respond to the ongoing challenges common across the higher education landscape today. Such an approach, once instituted, creates transparency and reciprocal respect among administrative leaders and faculty and staff. Perhaps most importantly, a departmental culture of transparency creates stronger departmental structures at every level. Participants in this presentation will leave the session with an action plan and checklist for creating more transparency for everyone in any department or school or college.