

Mentoring the Department Chair: Creating a Community of Support

By Krista Lussier, Brenda Smith, and Shawn Read

Thompson Rivers University, Kamloops, British Columbia, Canada

Description:

The role of the departmental chair is as complex as it is multifaceted, and those taking on the role often do so without understanding the depth and breadth of the work. In most cases, the departmental chair is a faculty member who is voted by faculty to take on a role to provide both an academic and administrative leadership role in the department. Yet the novice chairperson often does so not only without any formal leadership training, but also without a real understanding of either the scope of the position or the complex workings of the administrative departments at the University. While the exact role of a chair depends upon the needs of the department, the role usually includes the following responsibilities: mentoring colleagues, collaborating with other departments, interpreting policy, advocating for the department, and being the program expert for external stakeholders. Navigating all of these roles requires one to possess excellent communication skills, conflict management skills, creativity, organization, and vision. Clearly, this is a huge undertaking by a faculty member whose career to date has been primarily focused on teaching, service, and scholarship.

At Thompson Rivers University, we have taken a comprehensive approach to supporting not just the initial growth, but also the ongoing development of departmental chairpersons. Under the leadership of three experienced departmental chairs, a network of chairs has been created and a support structure has been formalized. Using a needs assessment, chairs are asked about their own needs and areas for development are identified. Learning opportunities are then structured around these needs. Within the Chairs Group, an active learning community has developed to encourage the exchange of information, insights, and concerns among department chairs with a supportive solution focus. The support tools available for department chairs are developed with a goal of providing both new and experienced chairs with valuable information and useful resources to assist them in their work as administrative and academic leaders of their departments. We ultimately seek to provide chairs with the opportunity to build a network of resources and contacts within the university for ongoing information sharing, problem solving, and support. Chairs do not simply need orientation when they begin their chair role; they also require ongoing support, a community of learning, and leadership development throughout their term

This session will discuss current research and best practices of group mentorship, orientation, and academic leadership development which shaped our practice. We will then share our experiences developing a needs assessment to identify individual and collective needs, creating interactive learning opportunities, building a Moodle site for online accessible support, and nurturing a learning community. In this interactive session, participants will briefly reflect on their individual current practices, and then break off into small groups to explore orientation and mentorship needs and to create an interactive learning activity. We will then bring the audience together with a large group discussion of the small group experience, and end the session with an

example of mentorship speed dating that we have used as a creative way to build relationships within our learning community.