



THE

DEPARTMENT CHAIR PRIMER



What Chairs
Need to **KNOW**
and **DO** to Make
a Difference



DON CHU

THE DEPARTMENT CHAIR PRIMER

Second Edition

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The Department Chair

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Don Chu

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CONTENTS

Preface to the New Edition	vii
PART ONE: WHAT NEW CHAIRS NEED TO KNOW	1
1 Why Department Chairs Are Important	3
2 The Chair's Role as Department Leader	9
3 The Chair's Ecosystem	16
4 Handling Stress and Conflict	26
5 What Kind of Chair Will You Be?	30
PART TWO: GETTING STARTED: HOW NEW CHAIRS CAN MAKE A DIFFERENCE	35
6 Before You Begin	37
7 Planning	42
8 Budget, Resource Management, and Development	52
9 Curriculum, Scheduling, and Instruction	67
10 Professional Development, Personnel Management, and Handling Challenging Personnel	76
11 Departmental Communication	85
12 Student Development	92
13 Strategic Positioning	97
14 Understanding Your Institution and Your Role as Department Chair	102
Resources	107
References	109
The Author	111
Index	113

*This book is dedicated
to those who hold most dear honor, loyalty, service, and integrity;
to my parents, who taught me these principles;
to my children, who carry forward these virtues;
and to my wife, Janine, whose love reminds me why they are
so important.*

PREFACE TO THE NEW EDITION

This is a book for academic leaders who are almost certainly too busy to read it—new department chairs. Chairs tell researchers that when they make the switch from faculty member to administrator, this transition into a brand new role takes up so much of their daily focus that they don't have the time or energy for much of anything else. Most say it takes them a year or even two before they feel that their feet are on the ground. Having been a department chair myself, I understand how important it is to get up to speed quickly and start doing the job. And not just for our own sake: chairs have never been more important to our departments, to our faculty, to our students, and to the community and society we serve in higher education than we are today.

The department chair is a change agent, the critical link in leadership that can lead to significant and almost immediate positive changes in higher educational institutions. In philosophy and sociology, the concept of “agency” is the capacity of individuals to make choices, to act on the world to change it. Gone are the days when chairs could wait out their terms, just do what had always been done, and assume that staff and historical protocol will keep the ship sailing on calm seas. To be successful in challenging times such as these, chairs need to be prepared for the job.

Our roles and responsibilities have shifted away from what they have been throughout our careers. As faculty, we may spend decades immersed in the culture and norms of behavior of our disciplines. We learn to analyze and write, to prepare and teach. We learn the language and customs of our disciplinary homes. But most new chairs take on this administrative job—in addition to their teaching duties—with little or no training. No wonder that new administrators so often feel at sea.

Chairs turn over rapidly in colleges and universities. Research shows that about half of all chairs turn over every three to six years (Chu and Veregge, 2002). For higher education to fulfill its vital social mission, department leaders must be prepared for their positions by getting up to speed on the basics quickly, educating themselves about the new role, and continuing to learn on the job. Chairs can actively manage and lead to improve the quality and productivity in higher education. The role of chair can be learned.

WHAT'S NEW IN THIS EDITION

This revision of *The Department Chair Primer* provides new administrators with what they need in an easily accessible form. These pages give you the context you need to get started and are full of practical ideas, examples, and possibilities for actions that you can take to make a difference. If you have the time and inclination to learn more about chairing, the Resources section at the back of the book lists some of the best of a growing list of references for theoretical and conceptual enrichment.

This book is divided into two parts. Part One provides the basics that you need to know as a front-line member of your institution's leadership and management team. Part Two is an overview of steps you can take to make good things happen in your department. Chapter Fourteen provides questions that you—as an individual or as part of a team of chairs—can work through to deepen your understanding of what you face and what actions you might take, given the particulars of your department and the environment in which it operates.

The landscape of higher education is changing rapidly and dramatically. Increasingly, more and more chairs are eager to create a culture of leadership and responsibility—to make a difference. I hope you will consider this new edition of *The Department Chair Primer* your guide in your new role as leader and your ongoing charge to make your department the best it can be for the faculty, staff, and students we all we serve.

California State University, San Marcos
October 2011

DON CHU

PART ONE

WHAT NEW CHAIRS NEED TO KNOW

“We are so fortunate to have you in our department,” the department chair said, welcoming the new faculty member. “We have high hopes for your work and the effect it may have on our students, your scholarly specialization, and the development of our service region. As your department chair, what I can do to support you and your work?”

How many of us had the good fortune to have an administrator who asked, “What do you need to help you in your work? What can I do for you to ease your transition?” Most of us—myself included—were pretty much left on our own to navigate this new territory.

As department chairs, we have the opportunity—and the responsibility—to be catalysts for the development of our faculty’s talent; to be proactive supporters of good work to benefit our students and our scholarship; and to help those to whom we are obligated by our missions to serve. By applying the intelligence, analytical skills, discipline, and commitment to service that have made us successful in our careers as faculty, we can become excellent department chairs. But whereas it took us years or even decades to learn the art and science of scholarship and teaching, we do not have the luxury of time to learn the ins and outs of department administration.

The challenge facing new chairs today is to be able to make wise decisions from their very first day on the job. Not only do chairs have to make decisions about personnel, policies, and budget, but they also—perhaps literally overnight—must become the public and professional face of their unit. The chapters in Part One will provide you with the basic information you need to understand your role and negotiate your environment as you begin your new job.

CHAPTER ONE

WHY DEPARTMENT CHAIRS ARE IMPORTANT

The new chair of the Art History Department was looking forward to taking charge of her new responsibilities. She thought she could make a difference in her department, which had always seemed to her to be stuck in the past. She was surprised to hear her predecessor speak bitterly of his time in the office. “I never wanted this job,” said Professor Ferguson, gathering his box of papers. “It was my turn,” he shrugged. “Now it’s yours. Good luck!”

Not so long ago, many department chairs like Professor Ferguson got the job because “it was their turn.” Chairing the department was seen as a chore, a minor nuisance that got in their way until they had served their time. Some departments rewarded those who were willing to take on these management chores with tacit permission to support and forward their own specialization. Other chairs were expected simply to echo the dean’s opinions or to blindly sign off on a course schedule that was the same every year, pass along “administrivia,” and not get in the way. Inevitably, after a year or two, they finally learn enough about budgeting, resource management and development, personnel development, and curriculum and course scheduling to do their jobs effectively—but then it was time to give up the job to someone else . . . who also felt unknowledgeable and uncomfortable, unprepared to actively lead their units (Chu and Veregge, 2002).

Thankfully, times have changed. The contemporary mission of most department chairs is much more active and demanding. As higher education faces economic and social challenges, as administration is flattened due to budget cuts, and as competition