

The Difficult Balancing Act of Being a Department Chair: Strategies for Academic Leadership Success



Few jobs on campus are more important—and more difficult—than leading within the academy. And today, academic leaders must respond to unprecedented pressures from stakeholders on all sides—while navigating often-conflicting demands.

Through 80+ research interviews, EAB has identified **10 academic and administrative responsibilities** of the modern academic department chair. Chairs can use these and the **accompanying strategies to excel in their leadership balancing act.**

Lead Your Department Through Uncertainty

Cascade Institutional Priorities into Relevant Department Goals ...

With faculty and dean feedback, chairs should develop and iterate on a list of 2–5 unit priorities rooted in campus-wide goals such as academic innovation, revenue generation, and process efficiencies.

Excel in Navigating Politics and High-Stakes Decisions

... Then Quantify the Department's Contributions for the Dean.

Chairs should share unit-specific key performance indicators (KPIs) regularly with their dean. KPIs can range from DFW rates to success stories that connect to campus-wide goals (e.g., awards, grants, rankings).

Transparently Communicate Financial Realities to Faculty ...

Each semester, chairs should contextualize department budget constraints and their importance for supporting the institution's overall financial well-being. One exercise is a simple budget scenario activity in which faculty create a costs versus benefits list for various strategic initiatives and discuss the implications as a group.

... While Proactively Managing and Reporting Department Finances Upward.

Chairs must set realistic financial targets for the department and raise any divergences to their dean. Best practice is sending unit finance reports to the dean before university budgeting occurs, highlighting proposed next steps to address concerns (e.g., a small instructional capacity gap or a dip in enrollment).

Invite Faculty Input Regarding Change ...

Chairs should actively collect faculty input, responding with curiosity-driven questions to clarify underlying faculty concerns. This exercise will, in turn, help chairs identify and get out ahead of psychological, cultural, and structural barriers to change (e.g., unrealistic goals or outdated processes).

... But Be Prepared to Back Institutional Priorities.

To gain buy-in, chairs should communicate the institutional imperative for change and how they will promote and support change implementation. Tools such as KPIs and rewards for innovation can reinforce changes and address common barriers to adoption.

Create an Inclusive Department Culture ...

Most institutions have room to grow when it comes to recruiting and rewarding underrepresented faculty and staff. Whether it's hiring, recommendations for special opportunities, or tenure evaluation, chairs should ensure all colleagues receive equitable opportunities and are treated with respect.

... And Don't Shy Away from Difficult Conversations.

Though chairs don't always have ultimate decision-making power, they can create a culture where people have a psychologically safe space to discuss concerns. A chair can establish ground rules for debate, call out unproductive commentary, and articulate next steps they intend to take as a leader.

Prioritize Department Colleagues' Growth ...

The most effective chairs regularly meet 1:1 with faculty and direct reports to discuss progress toward goals, provide real-time feedback, and engage in long-term career and workload planning.

... Just Don't Forget to Grow Your Own Leadership Skills.

Chairs should dedicate time each month to professional development focused on key competencies, including personnel management, budget fundamentals, and change management.