



WHAT MATTERS - AN ESSAY BY A PKAL VILLAGE ELDER

HOW TO TALK TO YOUR DEPARTMENT CHAIR

For some new faculty, an essay with the title “how to avoid talking with your department chair or dean” would probably hold greater appeal. I want to convince you, however, that it is both desirable and possible to talk frequently with these individuals, that doing so will help you succeed in your scholarly and teaching career. I also want to convince you doing so will increase the possibility that you can structure your day-to-day working environment in order to increase your work satisfaction.

Talking with your department chair (and dean) is necessary for many reasons: to obtain resources needed for your teaching and research, to determine whether you’re making satisfactory progress toward promotion, and to negotiate the various aspects of faculty life: what you’ll teach and when, what service you’ll be asked to give, what your advising load will be, etc.

Some Answers to Questions You Might Have

What should you be talking with them about?

Just about anything. One mistake most of us make is assuming that our new institution is basically the same as other colleges and universities with which we’ve been associated. That isn’t true. All campuses have much in common, but each has a unique history, mission, and institutional culture. You need to discover what those unique characteristics are in order to work effectively within your new environment.

First, you need to be clear about expectations for new faculty from both the departmental and institutional perspective, and your department chair is usually the best source for this. (There will be written documents spelling out such expectations, but, like the U.S. Constitution, they require skilled interpretation to be understood properly.)

You should:

- ◆ know what is expected in scholarship and teaching
- ◆ take your teaching evaluations to your chair before your first formal review and go over them with him/her to see whether you are on track
- ◆ find out what support is available for you intramurally
- ◆ ask if you can expect a reduced teaching or advising load in your first year
- ◆ ask what funds are available for course development, attendance at professional meetings, lab equipment
- ◆ ask about policies on academic honesty for students— is the department hard-nosed or forgiving
- ◆ ask about the departmental culture in regard to conduct with students— are faculty and students on a first-name basis, or is the relationship more formal.

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KEY POINTS

- ◆ Don’t make every conversation with your department chair or dean a request for something.
- ◆ Department chairs and deans receive more requests to support good ideas than they have resources to support those good ideas.
- ◆ Department chairs and deans are most likely to support the options that advance their own agenda.
- ◆ Department chairs and deans are more likely to endorse requests that come from groups of faculty rather than from individuals.



HOW TO TALK TO YOUR DEPARTMENT CHAIR

When should you be talking to your department chair?

Start as soon as you accept the position, and don't stop until you retire. Keeping him or her abreast of your activities will smooth your path because chairs (and deans) hate surprises. Finding out what they are up to enables you to coordinate your plans and activities with theirs.

Remember though, like you, they are very busy people. So keep your meetings with them short and structured so you do not waste their time (or yours). At a liberal arts college, fifteen minutes a week is not too often to talk with your chair, apart from the chats you may have in passing at the coffee machine.

For talking with your dean or divisional chair, you will have to gain a sense of the institutional culture about the timing and scope of such visits, but at least once a year is appropriate.

How should you talk with your chair?

It is best to adopt a respectful tone, but not an obsequious one. That is, let them know at first that you think they have something to offer you, and that you hope they'll be willing to do so. They almost always will be. As time goes on, you and they will find that you have much to offer them in return.

What you're trying to do first is to become well-informed about the explicit and implicit expectations of the department (and institution); you will also be making allies of your chair (and dean), so that they will be advocates for you as your career evolves.

Many interactions with your chair will involve your asking him or her for something. Maybe you want to teach in a different classroom or lab. Maybe you think it is time to overhaul all the introductory course labs.

Maybe you would like to try out a seminar in your specialty. Maybe you'd like to equip a new advanced lab course. Most of your requests will require at least the forbearance of your chair and senior colleagues, if not their outright collusion.

How can you talk with them in ways that maximize your chances for success?

Following are some tips from my long-awaited (by my mother) manuscript, "The secret lives of administrators." Keeping these points in mind while talking with your chair will maximize your chances for a successful outcome to the discussion when you find yourselves of like minds on an issue. It will also help to smooth the differences when you do not.

Department chairs (and deans) are human.

Really. Of course, that's good news and bad news. The good news is that they can be helpful, supportive and encouraging. If that describes your colleagues, be grateful and take advantage of their willingness to help.

However, even the best department chair can have a bad day (as we all do), and if yours seems grumpy on a particular occasion, come back when they are in a better mood.

Years ago, early in my career, someone advised me always to have two issues ready to discuss (one hard, one easy), and to read the lay-of-the-land quickly upon entering the chair's office in order to know which issue to put on the table at that time. Do the quick and easy stuff on a bad day, and save the harder ones for clearer weather.

The down side of being human is that humans in positions of authority can also be petty, jealous, spiteful, and self-centered, and that's just for starters. If that describes your situation, then you need to find others to talk with and depend upon.

Other senior colleagues in your department and/or politically-savvy members of the faculty can be surrogate mentors and guides into the institutional culture.



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But sometimes you have no choice but do deal with the “boss” directly; surprisingly however, the means for succeeding with poor and good administrators are much the same, even though the former require more tact and patience on your part.

You should first realize that:

Department chairs and deans receive more requests to support good ideas than they have resources to support those good ideas.

That’s a basic tenet of economics—resources are always limiting. No matter how rich the institution, there will not be enough money or time to do all the worthwhile things that could be done. This means that inevitably an administrator has to make choices— supporting some ideas and not others.

Choosing between a good idea and a bad idea is easy, but choosing between good ideas is difficult; that’s not a job most people relish (which is why administrators are rich and respected, or at least why they should be.) When confronted with difficult choices:

Department chairs and deans are most likely to support the options that advance their own agenda.

That’s why you need to know what the institutional mission is, and what the agenda of your senior administrators is.

If your chair— and your department— wants to develop more student-directed research projects in the introductory course laboratories, they will likely be more receptive to your request to attend a workshop on revitalizing introductory labs.

You’ll likely be more successful if you structure your requests in ways that can be seen as helping your chair and your department achieve their aims, as well as helping to advance your career.

In addition, note that:

Department chairs and deans are more likely to endorse requests that come from groups of faculty rather than from individuals.

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For talking with your dean you will have to gain a sense of the institutional culture about the timing and scope of such visits, but at least once a year is appropriate.

Again, this is simple economics. One can please more people and have a greater probability of success by supporting groups. This means that it is usually wise to line up some support from colleagues before you approach an administrator with a request for support.

For example, suppose you told your dean that you think it would be nice to have monthly discussions about teaching among the science faculty. Most any dean would think that’s a great idea, and would probably offer you “best wishes” for success.

But suppose that six faculty members came to the dean and said, “we’d like to hold monthly discussions about science teaching and we think we could attract other faculty if we had a small budget to buy lunches for everyone and to bring in an occasional guest speaker from a nearby college.”

Hardly any dean or department chair could refuse such a request, and you’ll probably leave with both “best wishes” and a commitment of some money.

However, no matter, how good your ideas or how well they match larger agenda’s, or how many of your colleagues support the proposal, sometimes your request will be turned down.

Because:

Someone will be offended by any decision made, no matter how sensible it may seem.

If the chair increases the budget for Bio 101, whoever teaches Bio 102 will think they deserve more money also. If the dean okays a new position in chemistry, the physics department will say they had a better case for a new position. (If that’s not Murphy’s Law, it should be.)

So sometimes you will get turned down, not because you do not have a worthy proposal, but because supporting your request would subject your dean or chair to a backlash that might interfere with other goals he or she is trying to achieve.



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If you do get turned down, try to find out why and figure out what to do to succeed in the future. If the problem is just bad timing, you'll just have to wait. Waiting can be a virtue because:

The first thing learned in administrator's school is not to make snap decisions.

Keep your meetings with them short and structured so you do not waste their time (or yours).

What they teach us to say is. "If you want an answer right now, the answer is 'no.' If you can wait until I think over the ramifications of this request and talk with others about it, the answer might be 'yes.'"

So sometimes you must just lay your cards on the table and sit tight, perhaps occasionally sending a polite reminder that you hope things are moving forward on your request.

In our increasingly fractious time, politeness is too seldom in evidence, so recall the advice of your first grade teacher:

Don't forget to say "please" and "thank you."

Many requests come to department chairs and deans in the form of demands— or worse, a kind of blackmail. "If you're really serious about having strong science programs, you'll buy us a new NMR (electron microscope, computing facility, whatever)."

Some administrators may be bullied by such an approach, but most will just be offended. Better to speak softly, "I know you've been very supportive of the science programs and we all appreciate.

Unfortunately all our competing schools have new NMRs for their chemistry programs, while ours is so old that we are losing our capacity to offer students the best education, as well as losing students to better-equipped programs.

Without a new NMR, we are quickly falling behind, despite all our efforts. Is there any way you can help us solve this problem?"

As mentioned earlier, almost anything a dean or chair does for you and your group will annoy someone else, so let them know you understand the political cost for supporting you, and that you appreciate their willingness to pay that price on your behalf.

And remember also that:

When a department chair or dean does something for you, they'll expect something in return.

The quid pro quo expectation holds in academia as elsewhere. So be thinking about what you would be willing to do in return that fits your own agenda. Decide on which possible service activities mesh with your career objectives and which do not.

Then when the dean calls to say he needs a left-handed scientist to serve on the institutional Parking/Transportation Task Force, you can say, "That's not something I'd be interested in doing, but I understand you're also looking for someone to run the summer student research program and that is somewhere I think I can make a real contribution." They will expect something from you, but try to pay them back in a coin that you choose.

Finally,

Don't make every conversation with your department chair or dean a request for something.

Otherwise you'll soon discover that they are not available when you come calling. If the only time your students came to see you was to ask for a letter of recommendation or to complain about a grade, it would take a lot of the fun out of your life.

It's not much different for chairs and deans; they like to hear some happy news about what is happening in your classes or in your research lab.

Make sure you drop by to update them on the results of some project they supported, to offer your services, to thank them for their help, to congratulate them on a personal achievement, or just to show them your new bike.

If you follow the tried and true political advice, "talk earlier and talk often," if you offer as well as request help, if you are respectful even if you disagree with your department chair or dean, you will be likely to find that you have a friend and a supporter for life. Isn't that a fair recompense for a bit of talk? ■