

CLS Department Chair Roles and Responsibilities 2015¹

Serving as a department chair is one of the most challenging and engaging administrative positions at a university. Chairs are the intermediary between your home department and the college dean, which requires that you represent the department's interests to the university and the university's interests to the department. As outlined in the Faculty Senate, chairs have specific roles and responsibilities (<http://www.uwlax.edu/FacultySenate/ABP/FacSenatePolicies.html>). In addition to the responsibilities outlined by the faculty senate, the College of Liberal Studies believes that effective chairs assume the following roles and responsibilities:

Transparent & Clear Communication—Respectful and professional interactions are required as department chair. Communications should be clear, accurate, coherent and professional in nature. Department chairs should include the Dean or the appropriate Associate Dean/Director of the School of Arts and Communication (SAC) on electronic communications with department members (for business related to College and/or School policies and goals, as well as share any documents with the Dean to support CLS and SAC strategic goals.

Enhance Department Culture – The chair has a key role to play in improving the overall “health” of the unit. Chairs should (re)group, (re)focus, and support faculty so there is a positive culture and environment within the department. A chair's responsibility is to be sure faculty's voices are heard and valued. Each member should feel that they have the opportunity to contribute in meaningful ways. In healthy departments, chairs do not make decisions unilaterally or dictate actions to faculty members, rather a collaborative nature and shared leadership promotes trust and a healthy unit. Positive norms are developed that consistently promote equity relative to all departmental matters and eliminate bullying behaviors.

Contributing to and Supporting the Department, College, and University Missions—Department chairs have a responsibility to guide the unit they are leading in ways that support the strategic goals and vision for the department, college, and/or school. Department goals, policies, and procedures should align with the College/School and University missions.

Strategic Planning—Strategic planning relative to course offerings, staffing, workloads, student recruitment, etc. are crucial to a successful department that supports student learning and faculty development. Planning in strategic ways (i.e., having a master plan for course offerings) allows faculty who are interested the opportunity to teach summer courses or conduct data collection/analyses in meaningful ways that support a faculty member's research agenda. Strategic planning also leads to greater transparency and accountability.

¹ Adapted from the work of Marcie Wycoff-Horn, Director, School of Education, UW-La Crosse

Honesty & Integrity—As a department chair one role to uphold is promoting a healthy unit/department by modeling honesty and truthfulness, as well as encouraging faculty members to uphold these same standards. By emphasizing these standards, and displaying them yourself, you will hopefully influence the department/office environment, resulting in a friendly and helpful workspace that is deemed a “healthy” place.

Ability to Delegate—Delegating tasks to the appropriate individuals/groups is one of the most important skills to develop. All faculty members should feel they are contributing to the department in ways that are meaningful based on their expertise and skills. Identify the strengths of faculty members and capitalizing on them is an important role of department chair, particularly when the majority of faculty members are untenured. A department chair should be focusing time and energy on higher-level tasks that are not as appropriate to delegate. In addition, delegation helps ensure that multiple faculty are learning how a successful department functions, thereby preparing them to step into formal leadership roles.

Accountability—The chair, like all members of a department and college or school, should have regular meetings with those to whom they report, in order to ensure that goals and expectations are being met, and to identify any obstacles or challenges that may be standing in the way of departmental success.

Self-awareness – Do you know how people really perceive you? Effective leaders do. They have an easy level of honest communication with their teams and their peers, and a thorough understanding of how they are perceived. Testing others’ perception of you can be as simple as observing their behavior. Are your co-workers and team members relaxed around you? Does all conversation stop when you enter the room? Furthermore, determine where your strengths lie as well as what complementary strengths you need from others to successfully lead the department. This includes understanding others and learning how best to utilize their strengths. Help everyone feel part of the team.

Self-assessment – Recognizing one’s “growth areas” allows department chairs (or any leaders) to be more effective. Questions to consider asking yourself might include: 1) What do I like to do? 2) What are my strengths or am I good at? 3) Where are my opportunities for growth? 4) What do I dislike doing or comes harder to me? 5) What professional development opportunities can I pursue to continually improve and vitalize my leadership skills?

Note: The CLS formal chair evaluations (implemented every other year—2015-2016 is the next evaluation cycle) assess chairs for the aforementioned roles and responsibilities. Formal evaluations, like a chair evaluation, are also designed to enhance a chair’s self-awareness and should provide opportunity for self-reflection.