

WHAT WORKS - A PKAL ESSAY

THE DEPARTMENT CHAIR AS LINCHPIN OF INSTITUTIONAL TRANSFORMATION

linchpin (n.) 1. A locking pin inserted in the end of a shaft to prevent a wheel from slipping off. 2. A central cohesive element

At first glance, a helicopter is an extremely unlikely candidate for flight. In fact, it has been aptly described as “an assembly of 40,000 loose pieces, flying more or less in formation.” What is most surprising about this aeronautical feat is that its success or failure rests on an innocuous pin that connects the main rotor to the shaft. If this pin should fail to perform the delicate balancing act required of it, the whole contraption comes crashing down--a fact which pilots seem to take a rather perverse pleasure in pointing out to first-time fliers.

Just as it would be easy for a novice flier to overlook this key connector, individuals unfamiliar with academia would be unlikely to perceive the crucial roles played by the department chair. Yet the chair is the linchpin of institutional transformation. Without effective leadership provided by department chairs an institution simply cannot lift itself to a higher level of performance. Chairs not only serve as the central connector among faculty within their department, but they also provide the wider connection between the department (and program) and every other component of the university.

Chair as linchpin within the department:

- ◆ keeps the department focused on its core values and mission, and on whatever tasks are at hand
- ◆ keeps department members focused on the positive so that forward movement is possible
- ◆ finds incentives and ways to reinforce good work and by constantly reminding colleagues on high standards and academic values
- ◆ makes a point of knowing the department well, learning the strengths and weaknesses of each individual; promoting the use of colleagues skills as scientists and researchers, programmers and problem-solvers; observing, asking questions, identifying key questions; identifying possibilities
- ◆ thoughtfully guides departmental conversation, skillfully leading meetings and negotiating old issues
- ◆ mentors new faculty, selecting and protecting them, and engaging them in conversation about vision and values; involving them in rewarding, motivating tasks; connecting them to their colleagues
- ◆ motivates the fence-sitters
- ◆ listens carefully to all members of the department and translates this into a departmental vision
- ◆ clears the path to the leadership of others.

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This set of essays from Southwest Minnesota State University reflects ideas and insights from one of PKAL's Leadership Initiative teams. Nearly 70 PKAL LI colleges and universities are collaborating with this multi-year initiative (2004 - 2007) funded by the National Science Foundation. From the efforts of leadership teams on these campuses, PKAL is gathering and analyzing evidence about “what works” in institutional transformation.

We hope to document that “what works” is when campus leaders articulate a clear vision of the future and set forth and accomplish challenging goals relating to that vision, having arrived at common agreement on appropriate strategies. PKAL's persisting emphasis on the importance of a collaborating and communicating community is reinforced by these SMSU essays.

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Chair as linchpin within the institution as a whole:

- ◆ keeps the big picture in sight, communicating it to the department, other departments and units, and the administration
- ◆ overcomes the limits and habits of his or her own training and specialization in order to connect within and without
- ◆ promotes an all-university perspective
- ◆ stays on top of the latest innovations in higher education and communicates these to colleagues and administration
- ◆ keeps colleagues informed of the conversation about why educational transformation is needed
- ◆ makes good work visible at every level
- ◆ assumes responsibility for playing a part in the creation of the institution's positive identity by communicating what is happening.

Perhaps most important for everyone to remember about the difficult, artful work of the academic chair is the requirement that the chair stick with the work even when others succumb to disappointment or frustration. The chair is charged with holding the department together *and* with ensuring that the department contributes to the health, energy, and momentum of the institution of which it is a part.

It is obvious, in this light, that a healthy academic institution carefully cultivates, develops, and appreciates its department chairs, providing essential support for those who play a sometimes unheralded role in keeping the rest of us and the institutions we care about aloft.

What is the role of academic department chairs as leaders of institutional transformation?

Comments from members of the Southwest Minnesota State University community.

SMSU President David Danahar:

The chairs make the essential grassroots contribution. It is in their hands to bring their colleagues along to invest in the institution's future. This is an exceedingly complex and difficult project, which requires broad-based support. This is only possible when chairs act as true leaders. A chair has to be a very good communicator, listener, and translator.

SMSU Provost Raymond Lou:

The chairs work directly with their faculty, educating them about the vision of the university and increasing their capacity to facilitate change across the institution. Part of that is making the faculty aware that whatever their discipline, it is but a component of the larger institution. For the institution to move to the next level, faculty must understand how their discipline connects to every other part of the institution.

The chair has the most difficult role in the university because he or she is a faculty member, but is expected to lead the others. This relationship is very difficult to manage. To be effective, the chair has to walk a thin line. If she becomes a parrot for the administration, she discredits herself with the faculty. If she in an unreflective mouthpiece for the department, she is not taken seriously as a leader by the administration. The art of being a chair has to do with translating and communicating the university's vision in a way that stretches the faculty without alienating them and engendering resistance.

SMSU Dean of Business, Education, and Professional Studies Donna Burgraff:

The department chairperson is the vital component of any higher education institution. It is the chairperson who, more than anyone else, must be the bridge between the faculty and the administration, for the chairperson operates in both worlds and is the only one with both perspectives. Without the leadership of the department chairperson, sustainable institutional transformation cannot happen.



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**SMSU Dean of Distance Learning
George Mitchell:**

The department chair has the key role of providing a linkage between the department and the university in terms of alignment and implementation of the vision of each of these entities. The university vision and goals constitute a broad framework for institutional transformation within which departments develop their own goals and vision consistent with and supportive of the university vision. The role of the chair is to clearly communicate the university vision to the department and to encourage the development of flexible departmental processes that will facilitate alignment of departmental goals and vision and to promote forward progress toward achievement.

**What is the role of the
academic department chair as a
leader of institutional
transformation?**

**Chair of SMSU's Science
Department, Professor of Biology
Betsy Desy:**

My role as department chair is to model a positive attitude about program and department change for the sake of improving student learning. The chair also serves as the information hub: she must be informed about activities on campus (and nationally) and use that information as points of discussion during regular departmental meetings to match ideas and activities with the appropriate faculty who will embrace those ideas and mold them into a distinct action plan.

A chair's role in change is to present manageable models for change—i.e., one step at a time within the larger context of departmental/institutional transformation. But all those small changes must be linked to the larger goal or vision of institutional change.

A few months ago, the biologists were talking about applying for a grant that involved redesigning our large non-major's course. One of the faculty commented that she wasn't sure she wanted a sweeping transformation as she had already instituted significant changes to the course she taught. At this point our "resident curmudgeon", who usually opposed any suggestions of course redesign, turned to her and said something to the effect of: "We don't have to change everything; there are small things we can change that can still affect student learning in a very meaningful way." After all these years, I took that as a sign that my influence may have been felt even by the most resistant person in the department. For me, helping to change his viewpoint was a grand success. ■