

If you must appoint an associate professor as chair (essay)

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Succession planning for academic administrators is not ingrained in the academic culture, and receives little or no attention. For this and other reasons, a dean may sometimes appoint an associate professor to the position of department chair.

In fact, over a 20-year period of participating in workshops for new chairs, I have seen a marked increase in the appointment of assistant and associate faculty to this role. In my most recent workshop, a majority (~44/80) of participants were not full professors, including some assistant professors, and not one had had a serious conversation with the dean regarding professional development.

It is unfortunate that any administrator would feel it necessary to impose on those still building their faculty careers to fill the role of department chair. This suggests that the senior faculty in those departments do not care about the unit or that the dean does not have confidence in their ability to lead their colleagues. One wonders why the university would want to invest in a unit that has not paid attention to something as important as planning for the chair of the future.

However, once the decision is made to appoint an associate or assistant professor to that position, there are certain procedures that should be followed.

The dean has both professional and ethical obligations in these situations that should be confronted squarely. These obligations center on the necessity of giving the faculty member the guidance, opportunity and resources needed to progress in rank to full professor. The individual will eventually return to the faculty and should not be excessively disadvantaged as a result of serving the university.

Given the enormous differences among colleges and universities, it is not feasible or desirable to develop specific guidelines for how to do this, but these broad guidelines are meant to assist the dean in fulfilling her/his obligations to the faculty member.

The guidelines below assume that the dean has considered all options for the department and has decided to select the chair from among the associate professors. It is hoped that it would never be necessary to ask an assistant professor to assume such a role, although it has occurred; these guidelines take on further importance in such cases.

Further, these guidelines assume that discussions between the dean and prospective chair will separate into two threads (preferably with independent meetings), one on the administrative duties and an independent one on a plan to assist the faculty member in attaining full professor.

The process should begin with a meeting between the dean and the prospective chair. This meeting should be a candid assessment of the candidate's professional development toward meeting the criteria for full professorship and how service to the college and university will affect progress toward that goal.

Of course, the dean cannot guarantee that the candidate will meet the criteria, but there should be a mutual understanding of what the criteria are and a realistic assessment of the probability of meeting those criteria while serving as chair.

The result of the meeting should be a document that establishes the current status of the candidate toward meeting the criteria for promotion and what the dean is committing in resources and support to help the candidate meet those criteria.

It should also include a clear statement of what the chair will accomplish toward promotion. The dean and chair should discuss the option of sharing this document at the appropriate time with the college and university promotion and tenure committees, as well as with the provost.

The document should formalize the range of commitments by the dean, and also include the specific details of those commitments. Some examples might be:

- A half-time research assistant assigned to assist the chair with her/his scholarship during the period of service as chair.
- A budget, independent of the departmental budget, should be made available to assist with meeting the criteria for promotion. It might cover travel, equipment or other expenses that would facilitate promotion.
- Full summer salary should be provided with no teaching assignment and little or no administrative assignment. Perhaps funds might be made available to support an associate chair to cover most of the administrative duties during this time.

It might be that the chair's duties really leave little time to work toward promotion, and in this case the dean may commit a full year's research leave at the end of the chair's service. This would have to include additional funds needed to meet the criteria for promotion. However, it is still important that the chair do some

work toward promotion while serving as chair.

At this point the chair should know what resources the dean will make available, and the dean will know what to expect from the chair in terms of progress toward promotion. The latter should be as specific as the former. It should also be understood by both parties that continuation of the resources are dependent on the chair meeting agreed-upon benchmarks for progress toward promotion.

This document should serve as a guide for the dean and chair to meet each semester to review progress toward promotion (and should be separate from the administrative evaluation of the chair by the dean). This will allow both individuals to assess progress as well as the sufficiency of the resources toward meeting the criteria for full professor.

This process should be transparent, with departmental faculty being aware of the expectation that the chair will continue to advance toward full professor while serving as chair. It is also important that the resources for the chair's progress are independent of and in addition to the departmental budget.

Assurances like this are necessary to ensure that both the institution and an associate professor benefit from such an arrangement.

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