

Delegating and Using Committees¹

Deer in the Headlights

When I became department chair, I thought I understood what the role would require. After all, I had been an active faculty member in the department for 20 years. I quickly learned how wrong I was. During my first year as chair, I found myself asking almost daily, “I’m responsible for that? And it’s due tomorrow?” If that sounds familiar, you are not alone. I have learned that this experience is common among new chairs. I think of it as the “deer in the headlights” phase of the transition from faculty member to department chair. Learning to delegate the many administrative tasks that come your way is essential to becoming an effective chair.

Delegating Responsibility

Leadership development texts and programs often remind new leaders that “what got you here won’t get you there” (Goldsmith, 2007). For new department chairs, the message is straightforward: the skills and accomplishments that led to success as a faculty member are not sufficient for success as chair. Faculty achievement is typically measured by individual contributions closely tied to one’s training and expertise. A chair’s effectiveness, by contrast, depends largely on the department’s overall performance. Are students’ educational needs being met by the department? Are university policies being followed? Are data requests and reports submitted on time? Are faculty members meeting—or exceeding—expectations in their assigned duties?

Mastering the “art of delegation” is key to the success of department chairs and other academic leaders who must manage administrative responsibilities alongside other competing demands. By delegating some administrative tasks, chairs can focus on strategic initiatives to advance the department and address matters that specifically require the chair’s attention (e.g., sensitive personnel matters; representing the department at university events). Delegation of administrative work is also necessary if chairs are to continue some level of engagement in research, teaching, and professional service. Because most chairs eventually return to faculty roles, preserving time for scholarship and professional work is especially important.

For all these reasons, learning to responsibly delegate some administrative tasks to others is necessary for chairs to effectively lead their departments. Delegating responsibly does not mean relinquishing all control or avoiding accountability. Chairs are responsible for ensuring that the administrative work of the department is completed in a timely and accurate manner but that does not mean they are expected to do the work single-handedly. Building teams to assist in the administration of the department is key to being an effective chair.

Why are some chairs reluctant to delegate? Their reluctance may be rooted in the belief that training others will take more time than doing the work themselves. Although delegation requires an initial investment, that investment is usually far less than the time spent continuing to do the work alone. As Tucker (1992) notes, managing administrative duties without delegating may work briefly, but for most chairs it soon becomes

¹ This material, largely based on the work of Tucker (1992), was updated and organized by Janet Kistner, Director, Institute for Academic Leadership, Vice Provost, Florida State University.

unsustainable. As responsibilities accumulate, chairs have less time to advance the department, address ongoing problems, and maintain their own scholarly and professional work. Failing to delegate can also come at a significant personal cost.

Some chairs hesitate to delegate because they are unsure others will complete the work effectively. Responsible delegation requires appropriate oversight and periodic check-ins to keep the work on track. Still, Tucker (1992) cautions that chairs who feel compelled to monitor every detail and impose unrealistically high standards can drift into micromanagement—an approach that is especially ineffective in academic settings. Gunsalus (2006, p.11) offers wise advice for chairs and other academic leaders: “To survive or even thrive as a leader and manager in an academic setting, you must know yourself”. Honest reflection on one’s strengths and vulnerabilities before assuming an academic leadership role can help anticipate likely challenges, including the tendency to micromanage.

Dettmar (2022) offers a humorous account of his early experience as chair, including his struggle to delegate. His difficulty did not stem from a need to control the work or from a belief that doing it himself would be easier than training others. Instead, he failed to track administrative deadlines closely enough. By the time he realized a task was due, there was no longer time to delegate it, leaving him to complete it himself. Knowing the academic administration calendar is therefore necessary for effective delegation and, more broadly, to surviving the chair role.

In short, effective delegation is essential to sound department management, especially in large departments where the volume and complexity of work require clear structures for participation and decision-making. It enables chairs to meet substantial administrative demands without sacrificing their own teaching, scholarship, or other professional responsibilities, and its value extends beyond easing the chair’s workload. Faculty involvement in developing policies, implementing decisions, and shaping departmental direction is central to shared governance. Departmental committees are one of the main ways faculty contribute meaningfully to that work.

Using Committees

Used thoughtfully, committees give faculty a voice in departmental governance, thus building trust, and helping to counter the impression that decisions are made solely by the chair or through private consultation with administrators. Another benefit of using committees is that decisions are strengthened by bringing multiple perspectives to issues such as hiring priorities, promotion and tenure, budgets, and departmental policies. Through committee work, faculty learn more about one another’s scholarship and responsibilities, often leading to more collegial relationships across program areas and a shared sense of departmental purpose. In departments with diverse methods, fields, or professional cultures, that shared understanding is especially important for building consensus and sustaining a healthy climate. Committees are also important for professional development and succession planning by revealing who is willing to take on important work, exercise sound judgment, and serve as a responsible steward of the department.

Take the time to codify the purpose, responsibilities, and membership of committees in written bylaws. This ensures continuity of departmental operations and helps create a department that is transparent, collaborative, and collegial (O’Meara et al., 2020). Chairs should review bylaws periodically to determine whether existing committees remain useful.

Outdated committees should be dissolved, and new committees added as emerging priorities require.

The next section expands these principles by outlining common committee structures, committee types, membership arrangements, and sample committee charges. It is included to help chairs think practically about how delegation can be organized within departmental governance.

Committee Structure

Committees fall into two categories: standing and ad hoc. Standing committees operate continuously, even as membership changes, and typically continue from year to year (e.g., promotion and tenure committee). Ad hoc committees are created for specific tasks and disband when their work is complete (e.g., search committees).

Tucker (1992) notes that the purposes of committees generally fall into one of three types: developing policies, carrying out administrative responsibilities, and making recommendations to the chair on specific issues. Policy-focused committees develop rules, criteria, and procedures for departmental activities such as faculty evaluation, student admissions, workload assignments, and space allocation. Administrative committees apply established policies and criteria to specific decisions or recommendations, such as reviewing program applications, evaluating faculty performance, recommending workloads, or assigning space. Committees formed to make recommendations to address specific questions or projects, such as planning new facilities or recommending equipment purchases, are typically ad hoc.

Department chairs need to provide committees with enough guidance to work effectively. A clear charge should define the committee's responsibilities, required criteria, limits of authority, permissible actions, and deadlines. Most committees make recommendations to the chair or make proposals to be voted on by the department, although some have decision-making authority. At the outset, it should be clear to members what they are being asked to do.

Committee members may be appointed by the department chair, elected by the department, or selected through a combination of both methods, depending on departmental bylaws. The committee chair may likewise be appointed by the department chair, elected by committee members, or elected by the department. In some cases, department chairs may serve on committees as voting or ex officio members.

In all departments, there are committees that require relatively little time and effort and those that are more labor-intensive, requiring frequent meetings over the course of the academic year and focusing on matters that are challenging or sensitive in nature. Chairs need to take this into consideration when making assignments and ensure fair and balanced distribution of workloads across faculty.

Example of Standing Committees of a Large Department

Department size and composition help determine how many standing committees are needed and what kinds of work they should address. Large departments with multiple disciplinary areas or graduate programs usually require more standing committees than smaller departments. Listed below is an example of the standing committees of a large department along with a summary of the main functions of each. This is not intended as a

model but simply an example of the types of committees that may be needed in a large department.

Elections Committee – solicits nominations from eligible voters for vacancies on departmental committees and other elected positions in the department

Executive Committee – monitors and discusses all budgetary matters, advises the chair on issues related to long-range planning, etc.

Faculty Development Committee – establishes and carries out procedures for annual evaluation of faculty; recommends evaluations of research, teaching, service and overall evaluations; examines performance of selected faculty members qualifications for promotion and/or tenure; provides a department-wide ranking for merit pay recommendations.

Promotion and Tenure Committee – makes recommendations regarding promotion and tenure for tenure-track faculty and promotion for specialized faculty; conducts third-year reviews of tenure-track faculty.

Graduate Studies Committee – establishes and helps implement policies relating to department-wide aspects of graduate admissions, training, curriculum, program requirements, etc.; makes proposals to add, delete, or change graduate level courses that are then voted upon by the faculty.

Graduate Student Advisory Committee – discuss issues relevant to graduate students and graduate training in the department and serve as an advisory body to the Director of Graduate Studies.

Undergraduate Studies Committee – establishes and helps implement policies relating to undergraduate training, curriculum changes, and advising; makes proposals to add, delete or change undergraduate level courses that are then voted on by the faculty.

Space Committee – makes recommendations for space assigned to the department.

Facilities Committee – supervises operation of shop technical facilities and personnel.

Colloquium Committee - collects nominations for colloquium speakers from faculty and staff members and selects candidates for the Departmental Colloquium Series; plans and coordinates travel arrangements, room scheduling, refreshments, etc.

Library Committee - keeps faculty informed of library activities and requests as needed, and serves as departmental liaison to the university libraries.

Graduate Research Day Committee - organizes all aspects of an annual event in which graduate students present their research, including recruitment and selection of student participants and all aspects of an awards ceremony.

Undergraduate Research Day Committee - organizes all aspects of an annual event in which undergraduate students present their research, including recruitment of student participants and all aspects of an awards ceremony.

Department Advancement Committee (DAC) – recommends to the Chair strategic initiatives intended to advance the department’s external reputation, resource growth, partnerships, and student/staff/faculty success through coordinated initiatives that cut across alumni relations, industry and community-engagement, philanthropy, and ranking/visibility.

From the committees listed above, an example of a committee that requires relatively little time and effort is the Elections Committee. The work of this committee is completed within the first few weeks of the academic year. Committee members solicit nominations for all departmental committee vacancies and conduct elections to fill those vacancies. The committee then posts the final list of committee membership for all standing committees; a practice associated with promoting fairness and transparency in workload assignments (O’Meara et al., 2020). Because the work of this committee requires relatively little time, it is a good committee assignment for newly hired faculty colleagues who need time to focus on building their research programs and working on course preparations. It is also a good assignment for new colleagues because it helps to sustain an important “norm” of this department - that all faculty are expected to serve on multiple committees annually.

Committees that demand substantial time and effort, such as the Executive Committee, or that address sensitive matters, such as Promotion and Tenure or Faculty Development, are best suited for tenured faculty or those already promoted to the highest rank. These committees should generally include representation from each of the department’s major program areas to ensure the expertise needed for the assigned work and to reduce the potential for bias in their recommendations.

Effective committees operate under clear written guidelines that define their purpose and responsibilities, explain how members are selected, and describe operating procedures. Below is an example of guidelines for one of the committees listed above.

Example: Guidelines for the Faculty Development Committee

1. The primary responsibility of this committee will be to establish and carry out procedures for the annual evaluation of faculty. Such procedures or changes in previously approved procedures must be ratified by a two-thirds vote of all voting faculty members.
2. The committee shall review annually each faculty member in terms of their overall performance of professional responsibilities consistent with that member's annual assignment of duties. The committee will recommend to the Chair the assignment of one of four evaluative statements in each of the four evaluation areas of research, teaching, service and overall performance: Exceeds Expectations, Meets Expectations, Official Concern, or Does Not Meet Expectations.
3. The Committee shall provide to the Chair, for use in determining annual merit pay recommendations, a department-wide ranking of all E&G-funded faculty with assignments in research, teaching and service (typically tenure-earning faculty), and a

separate department-wide ranking of E&G-funded faculty with unique assignments (e.g., assignments in 1 or 2 of the areas of research, teaching, and service; these are typically specialized faculty). These recommendations will be based on all available information including department-wide peer ratings, area peer ratings, vita, current brag sheets, and other documents included in the evaluation files. Department guidelines for merit pay will be followed in these recommendations.

4. The committee shall specifically examine the performance of selected faculty members with respect to qualifications for Promotion and/or Tenure, including all faculty who have not been tenured and/or have not reached the rank of Professor.
5. For Assistant Professors, all annual reviews (including the Third-Year Review) will be considered as part of the examination process. For Assistant Professors, the Faculty Development Committee considers the reports of Mentor Committees, which serve as subcommittees of the Promotion and Tenure Committee.
6. When any member of the committee is being evaluated for any purpose, the member shall be absent from the committee's deliberations and voting. This also applies when a committee member has a conflict of interest with a faculty member (e.g., a spouse/partner) who is being evaluated.
7. The committee shall meet as often as needed during the academic year.
8. The committee shall consist of five tenured faculty (one from each area) who shall be elected by the department.
9. Two specialized faculty members shall be elected to serve on the Faculty Development Committee. These members will participate in committee deliberations and decisions for specialized faculty only. They will not be present when tenured and tenure-track faculty are discussed.
10. Each elected committee member will serve a two-year term (potentially renewable) and the election cycles will be staggered with no more than 4 seats open in any given election year. The committee shall elect its own chair on an annual basis.

Summary

Effective delegation and the thoughtful use of committees are essential to successful academic leadership. Department chairs remain accountable for outcomes, but they cannot and should not manage every responsibility alone. By assigning tasks to appropriate individuals or committees, setting clear expectations, monitoring progress, and using faculty governance structures well, chairs can manage administrative demands while strengthening transparency, trust, collaboration, and shared ownership within the department. Well-designed committees with clear charges, appropriate membership, and regular review help departments make better decisions, distribute work more equitably, preserve institutional knowledge, and build a more resilient academic community.

Finally, here are some tips for maximizing the effectiveness of committees:

1. **Use faculty time wisely.** Avoid unnecessary committee work, and review standing committees periodically to confirm that each has a clear, continuing purpose.
2. **Provide a clear written charge.** State the committee's objectives, expected deliverables, timeline, and authority. When possible, attend the first meeting to review the charge, answer questions, and explain how the committee's work will be used—whether it will make decisions, propose actions to be voted by the faculty, or offer recommendations to the chair.
3. **Define membership and leadership.** Specify how members are selected and how the committee chair is chosen. For standing committees, include this information in departmental bylaws to promote transparency and consistency. Specify the length of the term of service and whether terms are renewable. Stagger the election cycles to preserve continuity of membership.
4. **Share relevant requirements.** Identify and provide any policies, procedures, regulations, or statutes the committee must follow to complete its assignment.
5. **Monitor progress.** Require periodic updates so the chair can provide timely feedback if the committee gets off track.
6. **Document the work.** Explain how meetings will be recorded and how records will be stored, shared, and retained to preserve institutional memory.
7. **Close the loop.** Ask committee chairs to provide periodic updates and, when appropriate, a final report to the department.
8. **Recognize and reward committee service.** Recognize positive contributions in department postings, in department meetings, in written feedback and, as appropriate, by nominating them for awards, promotions, and pay increases.

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Questions

1. What responsibilities are hardest for you to delegate, and what makes them difficult to let go of?
2. List the five most time-consuming activities that you personally performed during the past year in your capacity as department chair. Beside each activity that you list indicate:
 - a. which of these tasks must be performed only by you;
 - b. which could be delegated to a person in the department, such as a secretary, faculty member, student assistant;
 - c. which could be delegated to a committee?

If you think a task that you are performing could be delegated, write the title of the person or the name of the committee to whom it could be delegated.

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____

3. Which committees have been most helpful with your administrative responsibilities?
4. Does each committee within your department have a written set of policies and procedures? To which committees are members appointed or elected? How is the committee's chair selected?
5. How is the committee member's work evaluated?
 - a. on departmental committees
 - b. on college or university committees
 - c. on state or national committees
6. How do you make committee assignments in ways that are fair, transparent, and attentive to differences in workload, rank, expertise, and career stage?
7. How can committee service be recognized and rewarded so that faculty see it as meaningful work rather than an invisible obligation?
8. What would you do if a committee recommendation conflicts with your judgment, university policy, or broader departmental priorities?