

Assigning Faculty Activities

Department chairs differ greatly in the way they perceive their roles and responsibilities in assigning activities to faculty members. Some believe that the professional nature of university teaching and research forbids the formal assignment of faculty duties. Others hold that a chair is a manager of resources, especially human resources, and that he or she is responsible for the department's success or failure in helping achieve the university's mission and goals. The latter view clearly requires that the chair take an active role in assigning faculty duties. In recent years, legislative demands for accountability and union demands for explicitness in faculty-administration relationships have strengthened the view that the chair must play a role in assigning faculty activities.

The trend is for chairs to assume more rather than less authority and responsibility in faculty assignment. The state universities of Florida, for example, require a formal assignment of faculty activities; a periodic audit of such assignments is also required. Further, the collective bargaining agreement specifically requires faculty assignments.

Finally, college and university budget models may be based on minimum or average workload data of this kind. In some states the legislatures have passed laws establishing minimum workloads for faculty, such as 12 student contact hours per term for university faculty. Some departments wrongly implement this policy by treating the established minimum workload as if it were a maximum workload. A chair may not believe in the worthiness of such laws, but where they exist, legislators expect faculty activities to reflect the laws' intent. Compliance with the law, however, does not mean that all faculty assignments must follow a rigid pattern. Assignments should be based on the department's goals, objectives, priorities, and policies, including the needs of the faculty and students. In implementing these goals and policies, every effort must be made not to violate the 12-hour law, should one exist.

Benefits and Purposes of Explicit Assignments

The chair has extensive responsibilities for assigning faculty duties, and this task is directly related to faculty evaluation. Most college and university administrators now understand that evaluations should be based on the performance of specifically assigned activities. They realize that individual faculty members and the groups who represent them wish to ensure that faculty members are not denied promotion, tenure, or salary adjustments because of failure to perform tasks they were never explicitly assigned in the first place.

Explicit assignments serve other important purposes in addition to evaluation. The development of equitable workloads among the department faculty almost demands a record of the particular assignments made to each faculty member. Systems for equalizing workloads are sometimes included in department policies. On the other hand, some faculty members believe that workload equity is a matter that they themselves must determine, rather than some absolute institutional standard of equivalency that they must follow. Such policy statements as those passed by the American Association of University Professors recommending numbers of teaching credit hours on the basis of the number of new and old preparations have been helpful guidelines in this matter. By making formal, explicit assignments, however, the chair is able to adhere to the department's policy, implement its goals and objectives, and maintain data to explain his or her good judgment in managing human resources.

Similarly, as students' needs are assessed and changes required, the chair can modify faculty assignments, thereby shifting faculty effort to cover these needs. If some subject areas are not covered or developed, the department can undertake some long-range planning so that it can do more than just fill the gap at the last minute. An analysis of the extent to which explicit assignments are completed may show the need for new faculty resources or professional career and development counseling.

Policies governing formal assignment of faculty duties generally include statements such as the following:

Faculty members should be assigned duties and activities in writing. These assignments must be clearly stated, and those receiving them should acknowledge them as understood.

The department chair, by virtue of his or her responsibility for attaining department goals and objectives, is the person who should make faculty assignments.

Effective faculty assignments require clear statements of department goals, objectives, and workload policies. The proper functioning of the department depends of the chair's maintaining adequate records and consulting extensively with faculty members before and after the assignments are completed.

Preparations of Assignments

What are the essential requirements of an assignment of duties? How detailed must the assignment be? How often should an assignment be made?

The department chair who tries to understand the many conflicting requirements for faculty assignments can reach several conclusions. A chair may conclude that the best procedure is to make assignments as brief and as general as possible. In this way maximum flexibility may be preserved, thereby ensuring that all bases are covered, no matter what needs may come during the year. Unfortunately, assignments that are brief and general are usually vague and subject to broad interpretation by the faculty member as well as the chair. Vagueness can make it impossible to determine whether the assignment has been completed successfully. In the event of a faculty grievance over tenure or promotion, the chair may be hard-pressed to substantiate any judgments made if he or she can present no clear evidence of duty assignment and performance criteria.

A chair who has faced only one grievance resulting from an assignment that is too vague or general is usually convinced that highly detailed assignments are necessary and justified. Even so, endless arguments may ensue, depending on how the assignment is worded, about the degree to which various assignments were completed. In some cases, faculty members may demand tenure, promotion, or salary increases, claiming they have completed all the detailed assignments given them and then submitting evidence to support their claims. A problem may also surface if a faculty member refuses to complete a task that needs to be done but that was not listed as part of the agreed upon detailed assignment made earlier in the year.

The two problems described above might have been avoided if the assignments had been precise. An assignment must be general enough to provide some flexibility for both the chair and faculty member, and it must be detailed enough so that both understand what performance is expected and what will serve as a basis for evaluation.

Chairs should be particularly alert to the information about assignments contained in the various documents that must be acknowledged by each faculty member. Some institutions notify faculty members of their next period of employment by means of a salary letter; it may contain general language indicating, for example, that for the fiscal year the person will be paid a specific sum for teaching, research, service, and other such functions as assigned. A person may be appointed for only part of a year or as a part-time employee during a school year; the assignment for a part-time faculty member may be more specific than for the full-time faculty member, e.g., the teaching assignment may consist of one specific course.

As the formal employment relationship between faculty members and the institution evolves, however, the salary letter often becomes merely a notification of salary award, whereas the contract document becomes the actual instrument of notification of employment and salary level. The contract document may contain a variety of other information, including a detailed statement of requirements in legal terminology. The assignment in the contract still may be given in functional terms—i.e., teaching, research, and service—but it may also list specific tasks—e.g., teaching one graduate course off-campus. In preparing a contract, the dean's office may solicit information from the chair about any special assignment terms to be entered in faculty contracts. At the same time, a chair should check with the dean's office to make sure that a faculty member is not assigned activities that are not likely to be required or performed—for example, a faculty member who has been assigned teaching as a full-time workload should not be assigned any research or service activities.

A chair might be required to solicit from each faculty member a projected work plan for an entire academic year. This plan might be the basis for the annual contract and the assignment of workloads each term. The chair usually is not required to agree to faculty members' requests concerning workloads; nevertheless, the assignment of a faculty member's workload or schedule should not be arbitrary or capricious. Consultation is a standard of collegiality; to impose a work assignment on academic professionals may be a denial of their expertise. In emergencies, of course, faculty members must be assigned certain tasks to ensure coverage.

In some universities, the annual projected work plan for each faculty member may be converted to an official document, and as such it will often include the details for each term of the contract year. The plan is not always implemented as originally prepared, however. The chair may change an assignment before it is fulfilled; the faculty member may undertake one or more activities not included in the assignment; or the faculty member may not perform an assigned activity. The alert chair will discover the existing discrepancies during periodic consultation each term and take appropriate corrective action. A consultation before a term begins, specifically to confirm and adjust the assignment as needed, should reveal the changes a faculty member is planning or anticipating. Such pre-term conferences also inform the faculty member of possible changes that the chair may request to meet changing conditions in the department.

The chair should adjust the assignment planning or workload projection records to reflect the activities actually performed. Similarly, he or she should obtain explanations from faculty members as to why certain assigned activities have not been performed, especially when nonperformance represents a breach of agreement or a failure to support important goals, objectives, and priorities of the department. It is equally important that faculty members be commended, in writing, for tasks well done, new activities successfully undertaken, and so on. The chair should communicate to the dean and other appropriate university officials any extraordinary achievements by faculty members.

Equitable Assignments

A chair must be concerned not only with each faculty member but also with the department's total functioning and how its workload can be distributed equitably among all the faculty. He or she must not only keep in mind the needs of individual faculty members but must also assess the effect that a person's assignment may have on the other faculty members in the department. If, for example, a faculty member is assigned to teach a course for the first time and is given some released time from other teaching responsibilities for course development, who will assume the teaching responsibilities of that faculty member?

Equitable faculty workloads can be accomplished in two ways: (1) by assigning workloads that are equitable term by term; (2) by assigning workloads that are equitable when averaged over the academic or fiscal year. Averaging workloads over an academic year allows the chair to assign heavier teaching loads during terms when enrollment is unusually high and lighter teaching loads during terms when enrollment is usually lower. Moreover, faculty members may be willing to undertake an extra heavy load one term in order to have a lighter load the following term, during which they will have more time to concentrate on their own professional interests.

The first step in preparing teaching schedule assignments for a given term is to review the teaching schedules of previous years for the same term. This information—together with information from the faculty and an awareness of personnel changes, curriculum changes, changing student interests, and so forth—can serve as the basis for developing teaching schedules for the current term.

In assigning teaching activities, the chair should ask the following questions about each faculty member's assignment:

- Has this faculty member taught this particular course before? Does he or she have more than one new course to teach?
- How many new preparations does this faculty member have? Will special assistance be needed for labs, computer usage, and so forth?
- Do these courses require any special activities, e.g., field trips, demonstrations, and so forth?
- How much evaluation of student work will be required?
- What is the mix of level of courses? The size of the estimated enrollment?
- How many thesis and dissertation projects is each faculty member directing? On how many committees is each serving? How many students is each counseling?
- How many undergraduates are being advised by each faculty member? What other undergraduate activities is each supervising or sponsoring?

Clearly, the chair must be flexible in assigning percentages of effort for each faculty activity. He or she should move away from rigid formulas and toward individual judgments about the workloads assigned to each faculty member.

The equitable assignment of faculty duties systematically allows the chairs to formulate and implement plans for attaining department goals while assisting faculty members in reaching some of their personal goals. This harmonizing, after all, is one of the purposes of assigning activities. The chair's success in this activity may well determine his or her effectiveness as an academic administrator and leader, since personnel assignment activities, and decisions constitute a major function of the chair's role. Chairs who are inadequate personnel managers could become liabilities to their departments. Some chairs

find personnel decisions so disturbing and distasteful that they resign. On the other hand, chairs who are interested in these kinds of problems and learn to cope with them may find rewarding careers in university administration.

Performance Criteria for Functional Assignments

For the busy chair, the task of assigning faculty activities commonly becomes a chore that must be done hurriedly. All too often the task is performed by making a simple list of the things the faculty member will probably be doing in the next few months. An even more unfortunate situation occurs when the faculty member is allowed to complete the assignment form without consulting the chair. In neither case has a real assignment been made, and the chair is forfeiting an opportunity to manage valuable human resources for the improvement of the department. Yet making periodic term assignments can sometimes be a distasteful waste of time. Assignment schedules that consist of a simple listing of the same set of duties each term are basically useless.

How can assignments be transformed into useful aids to the chair's already difficult task of resource management? A few suggestions about activities for each performance area should provide an indication of the essentials of a good assignment and should stimulate further thinking about the subject. The key is to think of each assignment in terms of how a chair should evaluate success in completing the assignment, i.e., what criteria should govern each assignment in each area?

Teaching Assignments

The assumption that teaching assignments should consist only of a list of courses to be taught is invalid. About the only thing that can be evaluated with such an assignment is whether or not the courses have been taught! More important, the performance of such an assignment must certainly be evaluated as "average." What could be the basis for an above- or below-average performance when everyone completes the assigned courses?

At the very least, a teaching assignment should rest on a clear understanding that the quality of the teaching will be evaluated. Further, a clear statement, preferably in writing, should be provided as to the types of evidence such as student evaluations or peer review that will be used in making the evaluation. It is the chair's responsibility to ensure that clearly stated criteria for evaluation are established by the department and are understood by all the department members.

Teaching assignments can be made with a degree of sophistication. The success of a teaching assignment should probably be measured in terms of what students learn, either in absolute terms or in relative terms (such as student growth). But have you, as the chair or as a department member, defined what is expected of a student who completes a given course? If so and if the learning outcomes are stated in measurable terms, successful course instruction will be measurable in terms of student learning. Of course, many faculty members will object to this method of measuring teaching success, citing inaccuracy of tests, differences in student ability or motivation, and a variety of other arguments. Admittedly, precise measurement of effective outcomes, such as attitude changes, does lag behind precise measurement of cognitive outcomes. Nevertheless, student learning is the primary goal of teaching and can be taken as one measure of successful teaching.

Other activities that might be included in the teaching assignment are developing courses; revising syllabi; updating laboratory experiments; converting courses to computer-assisted instruction; training, monitoring, and evaluating graduate teaching assistants; and other related activities. To avoid misunderstandings, the department faculty should agree that these teaching assignments are appropriate.

Research and Creative Activity Assignments

Research and creative activities play an increasing role in the assignment process and, in many departments, are necessary conditions for promotion and tenure. Again, the necessity of specific assignments and the insistence on clearly stated criteria for evaluation are essential. Probably everyone can think of faculty members who have been talking research for years but have yet to produce a successful grant proposal, research report, publishable paper, or anything else that might be considered a significant contribution. These “wheel spinners” could write books of excuses and reasons for their failure to finish various projects—if only they had a little more time!

If research or creative activity is to be included as part of a faculty assignment and if it is to be evaluated at a specific time, the faculty member should be able to provide a documented plan of action with some sort of time schedule for completing various parts of the research activity. This action plan might include such information as the title of the project; whether a library review of the literature is required; when the project will be completed; whether a proposal for outside funding is planned and when it will be completed; whether laboratory equipment must be acquired and assembled and how much of the laboratory effort can be completed this term; and what efforts at data collection and processing are required. If the faculty member is writing an article for publication, he or she should note whether a rough draft can be completed this term. If a graduate student is scheduled to complete a thesis, note what must be done to assure that he or she will be able to complete the research.

If the faculty member cannot provide a detailed action plan, perhaps the research should not be assigned! If the plan can be stated clearly, the assignment should indicate that the research effort will be formally evaluated in the future. Failure to accomplish set goals means that the assignment has not been completed, and this failure should be reflected in an evaluation. Of course, the faculty member may have good reasons for failing to complete an assignment. The chair has the responsibility for ascertaining and assessing the validity of these reasons, converting this information to appropriate evaluation judgments, and adjusting the assignments for the next term accordingly.

The term *failure* may be considered unduly harsh when assignments are being evaluated; perhaps *noncompletion* would be less grating. Regardless of the term used to describe this unfortunate situation, the chair must make sure that failure is not rewarded or allowed to slip by without appropriate reaction.

Service Assignments

Service is an assignment activity that may include a range of activities, such as serving as a member of professional organizations, university committees, or campus or inter-institutional committees. For example, a faculty member may be assigned to develop and deliver off-campus presentations designed to alert the public to services offered by the university, gain support for an on-campus program, or attract students to the campus.

Again, the chair should think seriously about the real purpose of making such assignments and how their success can be evaluated. If a faculty member is assigned to a university committee, is regular attendance at meetings expected? Is regular attendance considered “outstanding” or just “average” performance of this assignment? Should the department chair ask the head of this committee to provide an evaluation of the faculty member’s performance? If the faculty member was assigned to contact local high schools and explain new department programs, is the mere making of the contracts sufficient for successful completion of the assignment? Or does success require that a larger percentage of students in the schools contacted attend the university? Just why is this assignment being made? Will it really benefit the department, college, or institution?

Another kind of service assignment is holding office in a state or national professional society. Most chairs will insist that such activities bring “honor” to the home university. No doubt they do, but the effect is difficult, if not impossible, to measure. On the other hand, membership in professional societies has traditionally been considered part of the academic life, and holding office in those societies has traditionally been deemed worthwhile. Some public institutions now require a written report from faculty members about the benefits—academic and other—of attending regional and national conferences.

FTE Assignments

Faculty activity assignments are generally reported as fractions of full-time equivalent (FTE) faculty position. The chair usually specifies the fraction of a full-time workload (1.00) for each assigned set of activities for each faculty member. For reporting purposes, each assignment is specified in terms of a decimal fraction of an FTE position, e.g., 0.50, or as a percentage (50 percent) of an FTE workload; the total of the fractional assignments must not exceed 1.00 FTE.

Many chairs, however, have difficulty accepting this concept because full time cannot easily be defined in terms of hours per week. Some chairs insist that their faculty members work sixty hours per week and should, therefore, be assigned more FTE, perhaps 1.50 FTE. An exception to the 1.00 limit may occur when a faculty member is assigned a full load, whatever that happens to be, and then is also assigned some overload activities, such as teaching in a division of continuing education. On the other hand, part-time faculty members are always assigned some fraction of an FTE, e.g., 0.50 FTE. Thus, what constitutes an overload, or a workload greater than 1.00 FTE, is determined by circumstances and by policies in institutional offices and divisions other than the department.

Although some chairs would argue to the contrary, full-load assignment cannot exceed 1.00 FTE for full-time faculty members, regardless of the number of credit hours taught, the total hours worked per week, or the “extra” activities that the faculty member may plan to do during the term. Accurate assignment of FTE fractions for each faculty member’s activities depends greatly on the chair’s understanding and experience in reviewing assignment reports and in questioning faculty members about their actual efforts with different assignments. Consulting with an experienced chair and with the technical staff processing these data can also be helpful.

Chairs who misinterpret the minimum workload policy and make assignments on the basis that 12 class contact hours is a maximum load and thus represents 1.00 FTE often complain that no time is left for teaching, research, or service. This misunderstanding creates problems at those universities where every faculty member has been instructed by contract to

perform some research and service in addition to teaching. Moreover, a faculty member who is teaching more than 12 contact hours may or may not be overloaded. In sum, the workload standards should not be a basis for making assignments per se but should be implemented by ensuring that the faculty members perform their assigned activities and that the total department effort complies with the workload policy.

Sometimes workload policies may be satisfied by the compliance of a complete academic unit, such as a department or college, rather than by the compliance of each person in the unit. In such cases, workloads are averaged for each unit; that is, all instruction hours are totaled for a given unit and divided by the aggregate FTE faculty. A related problem concerns the interpretation of the differences between workload standards expressed as contact hours and as credit hours. For example, three contact hours in a lecture class per week per term are considered only one hour of credit. Lecturing for one hour supposedly requires more effort on the instructor's part than supervising a laboratory class for one hour. The concept of the contact hour is also used to measure counseling and advising time with students. In any event, the chair should know precisely what is required for each particular FTE reporting category.

Faculty activity is generally reported in terms of percentage of effort. For example, a faculty member might report 75 percent of his or her effort in instruction and 25 percent in research, regardless of whether the total effort constitutes a 1.00 FTE appointment or any fraction thereof. To reiterate, assigning a specific portion of a 100 percent effort to each of the categories of teaching, research, and service is a distributive measure.

A General Assignment Strategy for Chairs

Clearly, the chair's task of making faculty assignments is complex. It requires an understanding of many rules and regulations; it depends on a clear understanding of department goals and objectives; and it requires a significant number of judgmental decisions. A convenient and useful strategy by which to establish term assignments is outlined below. This strategy assumes that the chair already has department goals, objectives and priorities clearly in mind; that the faculty has consented to these; and that the chair is fully aware of the department members' interests, strengths, and experiences. The strategy comprises eight major steps.

1. Establish the instructional, research, and service workload that the department as a whole can be expected to accomplish during the term. Questions to be answered include these: What total FTE can be assigned? (That is, how many full-time equivalent faculty members, including graduate assistants and faculty adjuncts, are available to accomplish the department's work?) What relative effort among the categories of instruction, research, and service would best serve department interests and contribute to department goals?

2. Identify the courses to be taught during the term and the courses that are optional. Consult with faculty members, students, and other department chairs to assess the needs and demands.

3. Determine the special requirements that have been imposed on faculty members for the term. Ask the faculty for this and other pertinent data. Which faculty members will have released time on research grants? What institution, college, or department committee assignments have already been committed for the term? (Note: If you as chair find these "external" commitments heavy, remember that you have control over most of them! If you do not, it is time to get your data together and have a long talk with the dean!)

4. List, for each faculty member, adjunct, graduate assistant available to your department, the activities to which you tentatively expect each person to be assigned, without reference to time or fraction of FTE for each activity. Your choices of assignment should reflect both the department's needs and each faculty member's professional development (tenure, promotion, research, and so forth). The total listing for all faculty members should include each area and activity identified in items 2 and 3 above.

5. Determine how much effort, preferably in terms of fractions of FTE, you expect the faculty member to devote to each activity listed; double-check this with the faculty members as needed. If you use fractions of FTE, remember that the total FTE must equal exactly 1.00. If you use hours, the total hours assigned are not too important since, for reporting purposes, hourly assignments for each activity will ultimately be converted to the appropriate fraction of the total hours assigned (i.e., to a fraction of a 1.00 FTE). However, be aware that a 20-hour teaching load, if otherwise equivalent, may be .50 FTE for the 40-hour-a-week person but only .36 FTE for the 55-hour-a-week person. If hours are to be taken seriously, some standard hourly effort rates may have to be developed to ensure that persons doing equivalent work share the same workload report fractions. For these and other reasons, the standard fractional FTE (plus or minus x percent) for particular activities may be the best understood and simplified measure of assigned (and reported) effort.

The crucial issue is whether or not the final assignment is realistic in terms of what a faculty member can be expected to accomplish and perform well. In making the FTE assignment, the chair's judgment on such matters as faculty experience and department needs in teaching, research, and service activities is extremely important.

6. Assess the reasonableness of each faculty assignment both in terms of the activities assigned and the time or fractional FTE allowed for the activity. If inequities exist, adjustments among the faculty or in the total effort assigned may be necessary, but note that some equity adjustments may be moved to another term.

7. Identify evaluative criteria that you will use to assess each assignment being made; these activities typically are faculty activities but may include expected outcomes. Be as quantitative as possible. Both you and the faculty member must share an understanding of how the level of success in completing the assignment will be determined.

8. Discuss each assignment with the appropriate faculty member. Consultation may be required by a collective bargaining agreement or state laws. A consultation may reveal new information or become a negotiation session, making further assignment changes necessary. The final decisions, however, should remain in the hands of the chair.

These steps provide a reasonable and sound strategy for assigning faculty duties. The chair will want to involve the faculty in as many of the steps as possible but particularly in steps 1 and 2, where the department's goals, objectives, and priorities are established and form the basis for the planned quarterly activities. In addition, the chair should consult with each faculty member after the start of a term to make sure all is going as planned.

Questions

1. In your department, what is considered a maximum teaching load? Is it a certain number of courses or course credits taught per term, a certain number of contact hours per week, or something else?
2. If a person is assigned a maximum teaching load in your department, does this teaching constitute a full-time workload? If it constitutes less than a full-time workload, what other assignments do you give to make a full-time workload?
3. Is the teaching load of your department divided equitably among the faculty members, or do some members have larger teaching loads than others? Do faculty members who have the same size teaching loads receive the same percentage of FTE for teaching? In your department, what constitutes the workload of one FTE faculty member?
4. Have you ever reduced a faculty member's teaching load in order to assign him other activities?
5. In making assignments, do you follow any special procedures to ensure that the assignments are equitable? For example, do you assign a faculty member a specific number of points for each activity, and is he or she considered to have a full workload when the sum of all the earned points reaches a predetermined number? Or do you have some other method for ensuring equitable assignments among your faculty?
6. Have you tailored a teaching, research, or service assignment for a faculty member to help that individual develop a special competency or overcome a weakness?
7. During the past year, has your department had any problems related directly or indirectly to assignments?
8. Are faculty assignments used as part of your annual evaluation process?
9. Do you evaluate faculty on the completion or quality of their assignments?