



WHAT MATTERS - AN ESSAY BY A PKAL VILLAGE ELDER

HOW TO TALK TO YOUR DEPARTMENT CHAIR

For some new faculty, an essay with the title “how to avoid talking with your department chair or dean” would probably hold greater appeal. I want to convince you, however, that it is both desirable and possible to talk frequently with these individuals, that doing so will help you succeed in your scholarly and teaching career. I also want to convince you doing so will increase the possibility that you can structure your day-to-day working environment in order to increase your work satisfaction.

Talking with your department chair (and dean) is necessary for many reasons: to obtain resources needed for your teaching and research, to determine whether you’re making satisfactory progress toward promotion, and to negotiate the various aspects of faculty life: what you’ll teach and when, what service you’ll be asked to give, what your advising load will be, etc.

Some Answers to Questions You Might Have

What should you be talking with them about?

Just about anything. One mistake most of us make is assuming that our new institution is basically the same as other colleges and universities with which we’ve been associated. That isn’t true. All campuses have much in common, but each has a unique history, mission, and institutional culture. You need to discover what those unique characteristics are in order to work effectively within your new environment.

First, you need to be clear about expectations for new faculty from both the departmental and institutional perspective, and your department chair is usually the best source for this. (There will be written documents spelling out such expectations, but, like the U.S. Constitution, they require skilled interpretation to be understood properly.)

You should:

- ◆ know what is expected in scholarship and teaching
- ◆ take your teaching evaluations to your chair before your first formal review and go over them with him/her to see whether you are on track
- ◆ find out what support is available for you intramurally
- ◆ ask if you can expect a reduced teaching or advising load in your first year
- ◆ ask what funds are available for course development, attendance at professional meetings, lab equipment
- ◆ ask about policies on academic honesty for students— is the department hard-nosed or forgiving
- ◆ ask about the departmental culture in regard to conduct with students— are faculty and students on a first-name basis, or is the relationship more formal.

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KEY POINTS

- ◆ Don’t make every conversation with your department chair or dean a request for something.
- ◆ Department chairs and deans receive more requests to support good ideas than they have resources to support those good ideas.
- ◆ Department chairs and deans are most likely to support the options that advance their own agenda.
- ◆ Department chairs and deans are more likely to endorse requests that come from groups of faculty rather than from individuals.

