

The Role of the Chair

The *Faculty Handbook* states the following regarding the academic department and the chair of the academic department:

3.4 THE ACADEMIC DEPARTMENTS

The faculty is organized into academic departments that represent the principal components of the curriculum. Each department groups together those persons who are appointed to teach, to do research, and to give advice and counsel in designated academic disciplines. Excepting only interdisciplinary appointments, each member of the faculty is a member of a department. Any proposed alteration in the department structure may be referred to the faculty meeting after consideration by the affected departments and divisions.

The responsibilities of the departments are: to ensure that courses are taught, students are evaluated, and high standards are maintained; to make recommendations for improvement in the curriculum or facilities; to promote research and scholarly development in the subject area; to represent the subject area in the intellectual life of the College outside of the classroom; to promote, together with the President and the Provost, the recruitment and retention of faculty members; to advise the Vice President for Library and Information Services on research-materials acquisition; to advise majors on curriculum; to prepare budgets; and to perform routine program administration (e.g., ordering texts and supplies, turning in grades).

Each department has a chair or an acting chair in residence. The chair is appointed by the President on recommendation of the Provost after consultation with members of the department. The appointment shall be for a specified term, ordinarily for three years beginning on July 1. When possible, the office of chair is shared among members of a department; however there is no limit to the number of times a chair may be reappointed. The President may appoint an acting chair when necessary.

Departmental chairs supervise the administration of departmental responsibilities and act in accord with general departmental agreement. The chair has a particular responsibility with respect to faculty recruitment and hiring, and shall consult with the Provost regarding appointments, salaries, promotions, tenure, and other matters relating to the status of members of the department on limited appointment. The chair is responsible for the preparation of the departmental letter that is a necessary element in reviews of departmental colleagues for First Reappointment, Second Reappointment*, Appointment Without Limit, and Promotion. The chair is also responsible for the preparation of such reports, evaluations, etc., as may be requested by administrative officers of the College. In general, the chair acts as the representative of the department.*

*Faculty legislation is needed to revise this portion of the *Faculty Handbook* to address earlier changes in the faculty evaluation system at the College.

Chairs and Program Directors. The *Faculty Handbook* passage above implies that most faculty members are appointed to positions within academic departments, which are led by chairs. Some faculty members' appointments are principally or secondarily in interdisciplinary programs, usually coordinated by program directors, colloquially referred to as chairs. At Kenyon directors of interdisciplinary programs are included with department chairs when the Provost calls meetings of the chairs and are expected to complete many of the same responsibilities as department chairs for curricular coordination and communication with constituencies inside and beyond the College. Interdisciplinary programs vary widely in the scale of their activities – some offer majors with large numbers of enrollees while others often concentrate on much smaller numbers of students – and hence the demands on interdisciplinary chairs vary dramatically too. In this *Handbook* both departmental and interdisciplinary chairs are frequently referred to interchangeably, and we will not use the difficult construction department/program often because of its awkwardness in ordinary communication. Readers should understand that “department chair” can mean “interdisciplinary program director” in most but not all situations.

The Chair and the Administrative Assistant. This *Faculty Handbook* description of the role of the chair does not address one of the main duties of the chair, *viz.*, supervising the departmental administrative assistant and working with the administrative assistant to complete the essential day-to-day business of the department or program. During one's term as chair, no relationship is as constant and essential as that between the chair and the administrative assistant. The administrative assistant completes most of the ordinary business of the department – interacting with other College offices, responding to student inquiries, dealing with the department's financial details – but does so at the behest of the department, whose representative is the chair. In essence, the administrative assistant acts at the request of the chair, who is authorized to represent the department as a collective. Thus, good communication between the chair and the administrative assistant is crucial so that the administrative assistant can interact with others with the confidence that she or he has the backing of the chair and so that those with whom the administrative assistant interacts can be confident that she or he is acting with the support of the department and its chair.

The Chair as Representative. The *Faculty Handbook* section printed above emphasizes that the chair acts as representative of the department or program. The chair hence plays a critical role in the department or program's relationship to the College and to members of its administration, most notably the academic administration – the Provost, Associate Provosts, and Registrar, among others. Those offices expect the chair to be able to represent faithfully the department's interests and perspectives. The chair has a similar relationship to the faculty governance system. Chairs must therefore consider carefully how they represent departmental or program interests and perspectives when acting in the role of chair. If chairs are perceived to be representing their individual interests or perspectives rather than departmental views the representational authenticity of their expressed views and their authority may be placed in doubt.

In this section we provide documents that outline the particular responsibilities of members of the academic administration and list the current chairs of faculty governance committees.

Personnel Matters. Perhaps it goes without saying that in an institution like Kenyon no decisions are as essential to the success of the College as a whole and to its constituent parts as personnel decisions – the recruitment, selection, retention, evaluation, and promotion of faculty and staff. One of the most significant roles a chair plays revolves around faculty recruitment and evaluation, in which there is much coordination needed with the Office of the Provost, the Office of the Associate Provosts, and the Tenure and Promotion Committee. Chairs typically set the membership of search committees and thereby shape departmental recruitment. They are expected to be central members of new colleagues’ mentoring committees. Chairs also convene the departmental meetings from which the departmental letters that express the departmental stance on colleagues’ reviews for the pre-tenure, tenure, and promotion reviews are composed. Chairs typically draft those departmental letters. Departments and programs are shaped by these processes, so chairs must put their highest priority to them. Department chairs, as direct supervisors of administrative assistants, are responsible for confirming the hours worked by the staff during pay periods as well as assessing their performance at the end of each academic year.

The Chair and Department Morale. Chairs can do much to promote camaraderie and departmental cohesiveness. As the convener of departmental meetings and the member who has the greatest capacity to set the agenda of those meetings and the departmental agenda as a whole, the chair has an opportunity and a special responsibility to encourage good will and cooperation within the department. Informal departmental gatherings, whether of departmental staff alone or with students, can serve to cultivate departmental cohesion and a sense of common purpose as well as good feelings among colleagues. Organizing such informal gatherings often falls to chairs. In addition to treating all members of the department with respect and courtesy, the chair should work to ensure that faculty members do not treat staff members in a disrespectful or discourteous manner. Instances of actual or suspected abuse should be reported to the Provost and Associate Provosts.