

The Department Chair

Background

The department chair has one of the most important functions in the University. Traditionally, the chair of a given academic unit (department or school) is the person who, regardless of selection and nomination procedures, is considered by his or her colleagues highly qualified to assume the leadership for a determined period of time. Department chairs represent their colleagues, speak on behalf of their collective identity, and work with their peers to secure the future of the unit and of the institution it is part of.

This complex responsibility requires a set of specific qualifications as well as skills that scholars have not necessarily acquired through their training as researchers and professors, which focused primarily on acquiring disciplinary and interdisciplinary knowledge. Since the university is an institution founded on collegiality where leaders are coopted by their peers, the persons chosen do not necessarily have the specific training needed for assuming this responsibility, but they often have acquired the necessary skills through gradual learning on the job.

There is no need to further describe this situation; faculty members are well aware of it. However, this situation emphasizes the significance of the first official responsibilities assumed by a faculty member in whom others have seen leadership skills, having seen him or her in action as part of a committee or during specific tasks. The department chair position represents the first official level in the University's hierarchy, the equivalent of the mid-level executive in other organizational structures. This is why it is so important to examine the chair's specific functions and responsibilities and the challenges this position presents.

However, no document analyzes in depth these functions. Some University documents (such as the *University Government*) describe the position briefly and incompletely but provide no details. The Collective Agreement describes the process of selecting a department chair (section 37) as well as the chair's contribution to tasks such as establishing workloads, making recommendations for promotion or other important landmarks in a professor's career, but is not the appropriate document for providing an overview of the position's scope.

The following document analyzes the department chair's functions. It is meant to serve as a guide for chairs and help them accomplish their tasks. This description may also be used when a chair is selected and when he or she is evaluated.

It may also be used to guide actions and activities undertaken by the Centre for Academic Leadership, created as part of the Vision 2010 strategic planning exercise to support chairs and other academic leaders.

The Department Chair

General Description of Functions and Required Qualifications

The chair is the titular head and chief administrator of the department¹. He or she is responsible for the department's planning, development and functioning, particularly with respect to the strength of its academic and research programs. The chair is the main agent and representative for all relations between this unit and the Faculty, the central administration and the external community.

Although some functions require that the chair make individual decisions – for example, when making individual recommendations regarding hirings or promotions – in most instances, chairs perform their duties by working closely with their colleagues. The chair's functions require this constant collaboration, even if this is not explicitly stated in the text.

The department chair's main functions are presented below. This is a generic list of functions common to most department chairs. Depending on the nature of the department, other functions specific to the unit may be added to the list.

A- Main functions for department chairs²

Leadership

- Through actions and words, communicates and promotes the values, key success factors, vision and strategic objectives of the University and of the Faculty ;
- Working with department colleagues, prepares the department's strategic plan for the Faculty Council, in line with those of the Faculty and the University;
- Sets the department's priorities and implements initiatives that will ensure it reaches target goals;
- Ensures that the department's strategic plan is revised annually;
- Annually measures the progress made toward target goals using appropriate parameters;
- Ensures that the proposed professor hirings are in line with strategic priorities;
- Oversees the functioning of academic staff selection committees;
- Makes recommendation to the Faculty Teaching Personnel Committee on matters such as hirings, contract renewals or non-renewals, tenure, promotion, sabbatical

¹To facilitate reading, the term 'department' will be used to refer to departments, schools and equivalent academic units.

² In practice, several of these responsibilities are delegated to other department members such as committee chairs or committees. However, as the titular head of the department, the chair is ultimately responsible and accountable for the decisions before his peers and before various University decision-making bodies.

leave, and study leave, while keeping in mind the best interests of the academic unit as well as its strategic objectives;

- Makes recommendation on membership in the Faculty of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies (new members, renewals, emeritus professors, and adjunct professors);
- Acts as a mentor for colleagues, particularly for those at the beginning of their careers, and directs them to relevant resources;
- Encourages faculty members and students to collaborate and to actively participate in departmental, Faculty and University activities;
- Acts as collaborator and key adviser to the Dean;
- Working with the Dean, Faculty officers and other chairs, participates in the Faculty's management and ensures that the Faculty reaches both its strategic objectives as well as the University's.

Administration

- Prepares professors' workloads and recommends the workloads to the Dean, while keeping in mind the needs of undergraduate, graduate and postdoctoral programs that the departments offers, including interdisciplinary and interfaculty programs;
- Working with the Faculty's chief administrative officer, manages, plans and organizes the work for the department's professional and support employees;
- Working with the Faculty's chief administrative officer, is responsible for managing administrative resources, particularly regarding performance evaluation, professional development, career progress and internal communication, in compliance with established policies;
- Works with the department's graduate studies officer to plan and assign teaching and research assistantships;
- Keeps departmental colleagues informed of any research grants relevant to their research programs;
- Is responsible for ensuring that the physical and financial resources entrusted by the Faculty are well managed, in compliance with the policies established by the Faculty and by the University;
- Convenes and presides at department meetings and is an ex-officio member of all departmental committees;
- Is the communication agent for all official communication to or from the department;
- In collaboration with departmental colleagues, prepares the department's annual report and presents it to the Dean at the end of each year;
- Prepares and presents the department's budget estimates to the Dean, based on the priorities identified, keeping in mind short-term goals and long-term projects;

- Ensures that a good-quality department website is maintained and updated regularly;
- Is particularly attentive to student participation in departmental life;
- Is responsible for applying occupational safety and health policies;
- Exercises any other power and function in accordance with the University Act, general University and Faculty policies, as well as collective agreements between the University and its various groups of employees.

Programs and Courses

Working with the department's Undergraduate Studies Committee and Graduate Studies Committee, the chair:

- Makes the appropriate recommendations to the Faculty Council regarding undergraduate courses;
- Informs the Faculty Council of requests for approval of master and doctorate courses and programs submitted to the Faculty of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies;
- Participates in the design and implementation of academic and interdisciplinary research programs submitted by the Faculty and by the Faculty of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies;
- Collaborates with the Faculty to prepare schedules and calendars and ensures the maintenance of student files;
- Replaces program coordinators if necessary (for instance when there is a possible conflict of interests);
- Is accountable for activities related to program accreditation.

Teaching and Learning

- Ensures that each program's learning outcomes are defined and monitored;
- Ensures that syllabi for the courses taught within the department are reviewed by the appropriate committees and that evaluations and finals marks are approved;
- Takes the necessary measures to ensure quality teaching in all the department's courses; to this end, the chair applies the measures adopted by the Faculty and the University Senate regarding the evaluation of teaching and courses as well as the evaluation of programs;
- When a professor is hired or promoted, the chair ensures that the research conducted within the department relates to the programs of study offered by the department;
- Working with the Faculty, ensures that an appropriate information and academic guidance system is made available to students registered in the various programs offered by the department;

- Monitors questions and comments from students and ensures that they receive appropriate answers and advice.

External Relations

- Participates in negotiating agreements and affiliation contracts with external institutions whose services are required for practical or clinical training of students, as the case may be;
- Represents the department in meetings with external organization where the department’s presence is required;
- Develops strong relations with employers who welcome students for work placements.

B – Essential qualifications

The department chair:

- Is normally a full or an associate professor;
- Must have a level of bilingualism that is appropriate for meeting the University’s strategic objectives;
- Has a solid teaching and research background;
- Demonstrates good judgement, interpersonal skills, generosity, and dynamism such as to justify the confidence of colleagues and of the University’s administration;
- Assumes this function with full awareness of the strategic importance and high expectations this responsibility entails.

I have read this document:

Designated department chair

Date

Dean

Date