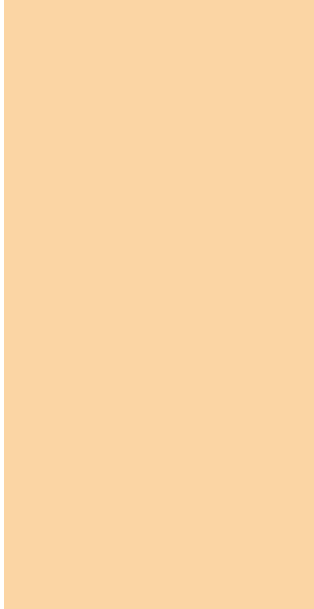




Chair's Survival Guide

**Essential Checklists and Tools for
Building Resilience in Academic Leadership**



A Free Resource by NCFDD



A Note to Department Chairs

Serving as a department chair requires both vision and endurance. You balance the needs of faculty, advocate for students, and translate institutional goals into departmental action. Few roles in higher education demand such constant pivoting.

This guide was created to make that work easier. Inside, you will find practical checklists, ready-to-use templates, and conversation frameworks drawn from NCFDD's experience supporting hundreds of department chairs across institutions.

These tools are designed to help you stay proactive rather than reactive. They will help you build structure around your time, communicate with clarity, and create a culture where faculty can succeed.

Keep this guide close. Return to it at the start of each semester to refocus, realign, and remind yourself that leadership is a skill you can practice and strengthen over time.

5 Tips For Overcoming Challenges That Chairs Face

Every chair experiences moments of strain. What sets effective leaders apart is how they respond. Recognizing common challenges allows you to plan ahead and build systems that support sustainable leadership.

1. Managing Faculty Conflict

Disagreements are inevitable when balancing individual autonomy and shared goals. The key is not avoiding conflict but approaching it constructively. Clarify expectations early, hold space for differing perspectives, and focus on solutions that uphold fairness and transparency.

Pro Tip: *Encourage faculty to raise concerns early. Setting regular one-on-one check-ins can prevent small issues from escalating.*

2. Balancing Time and Workload

Your calendar reflects your priorities. Without boundaries, every open slot fills with urgent requests. Protect blocks for strategic thinking, scholarship, and one-on-one faculty support.

Try This: *End each week by identifying your three non-negotiables for the following week. Add them to your calendar before anything else.*

3. Supporting Faculty Development and Retention

Chairs play a powerful role in shaping faculty experience. Recognition, mentorship, and feedback are among the strongest predictors of faculty engagement and retention.

Practice: *Ask each faculty member about their long-term goals. Identify one small step you can take this semester to help them move toward it.*

4. Aligning Departmental Goals with Institutional Priorities

The best departmental plans connect local needs to larger strategies. Regular communication with your dean or provost ensures your goals reinforce the institution's mission and help you secure support.

Framework: *Translate each departmental initiative into one sentence that begins with "This supports the university's goal to..."*

5. Managing Budgets and Resource Constraints

Budgets often limit what you can do, but they also clarify priorities. Transparent allocation decisions help faculty see the bigger picture and build trust in leadership.

Checklist: *Review each major expenditure with three questions in mind:*

- *Does this align with our priorities?*
- *Does it benefit multiple faculty or students?*
- *Does it position us for future growth?*

Quick Wins: Semester Checklists

Small, consistent actions build credibility and calm. This checklist highlights essential touchpoints to strengthen communication, clarify expectations, and prevent last-minute crises.

The Chair's Semester Survival Checklist

- ✓ Meet with each faculty member for a one-on-one check-in.
- ✓ Review workload balance, committee assignments, and teaching schedules.
- ✓ Align departmental goals with college or institutional priorities.
- ✓ Update the budget and confirm upcoming spending deadlines.
- ✓ Send a department-wide message that sets a positive tone and vision for the semester.

Effective leadership starts with listening. These conversations help chairs maintain clarity, strengthen relationships, and sustain momentum throughout the semester.

5 Conversations Every Chair Should Have Each Semester

1. Faculty Check-In: Explore goals, obstacles, and needed resources.
2. Dean Alignment: Confirm department priorities and performance expectations.
3. Administrative Coordination: Ensure policy updates or procedural changes are understood.
4. Student Feedback Session: Invite input on the student experience and potential improvements.
5. Self-Reflection: Review what worked, what stalled, and how to adapt next semester.

Insight: These conversations keep relationships current. They allow you to identify misalignments before they grow and to model a proactive approach for your team.

Practical Tools: Frameworks You Can Use Immediately

Running Efficient Department Meetings

Meetings should clarify, not confuse. When structure is consistent, faculty engage more thoughtfully and decisions hold weight.

Template for Effective Meetings:

1. Circulate a brief agenda 48 hours in advance.
2. Start with progress updates or department wins.
3. Identify key decisions needed and timebox discussion.
4. Record action items with owners and deadlines.
5. Send concise follow-up notes within 24 hours.

Try This: End each meeting with one reflective question such as “What is one thing we should start, stop, or continue doing?”

Faculty Support Conversation Framework

This approach turns a simple check-in into an opportunity for growth.

1. **Acknowledge Strengths:** Begin with recognition of recent accomplishments.
2. **Clarify Goals:** Ask open-ended questions about current focus areas.
3. **Identify Barriers:** Explore what might be slowing progress.
4. **Offer Support:** Ask, “What would be most helpful from me or the department right now?”
5. **Agree on Next Steps:** Summarize the plan and follow up in two weeks.

Why It Works: Faculty who feel seen and supported are more engaged, more productive, and more likely to stay.

Peer Voices: From One Chair to Another

Leadership growth is not theoretical. The reflections below come directly from department chairs who have participated in the Department Chair Success Program. Their stories show how structure, peer connection, and reflection can change the experience of leading a department.

Finding Focus and Renewed Purpose



"The Department Chair Success Program has helped me refocus and regroup after several challenging years in this role. The peer group and group coaching have been the most valuable part of the program. No one knows the challenges chairs face better than other chairs. Having a confidential peer group for accountability was wonderful.

I think this is a must-do program for new chairs who want to start their terms with purpose and focus. It was also a wonderful opportunity for me as a veteran chair to reflect, refocus my efforts, and consider next steps in my career."

Leigh A. Patterson, MD, MAEd | Associate Professor and Chair | ECU Brody School of Medicine

Key Insight: Purposeful reflection and trusted peer connections help chairs sustain motivation and clarify next steps, no matter how long they have served in the role.

Turning Complex Challenges into Manageable Systems



"The Department Chair Success Program has helped me break down large, often complex ideas into manageable chunks with useful tools. I benefited from small group feedback about issues I am facing, allowing me to approach them with greater flexibility. I also started thinking more purposefully about my future goals and pathways."

Elizabeth Shaunessy-Dedrick, PhD | Professor and Chair | University of South Florida

Key Insight: Leadership does not mean solving every problem at once. It means creating systems that bring structure to complexity and make growth sustainable.

Protecting Time and Leading with Confidence



"The Department Chair Success Program has empowered me to think about protecting my time and setting boundaries so that I can better manage tasks and have a work-life balance. I also have learned to be more confident in my role. Having fellow chairs at other institutions to discuss various topics with and to hear how things are done elsewhere has been helpful."

Dannette Y. Murray, PhD, CCC-SLP | Academic Unit Head | James Madison University

Key Insight: Boundaries, confidence, and perspective are essential leadership skills. Chairs who make time for reflection and peer exchange lead with greater focus and balance.

Beyond Survival: Toward Sustainable Leadership

You now have tools that can make daily leadership more manageable. But effective chairs need more than tools. They need a community, a structured approach, and ongoing guidance from experienced facilitators.

The **Department Chair Success Program** provides that foundation. It combines evidence-based frameworks with peer learning and practical coaching to help you:

- Build systems for managing time and conflict
- Strengthen your approach to mentoring and faculty support
- Align departmental strategy with institutional goals
- Lead with confidence, clarity, and purpose

Learn more about the Department Chair Success Program!

[Explore the Program](#)



Join a national network of department chairs who are redefining what effective leadership looks like in higher education.