



BOOK REVIEW

The Department Chair Primer: What Chairs Need to Know and Do to Make a Difference

Don Chu

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In *The Department Chair Primer*, Don Chu tackles the role of department chair by focusing on two elements: what new department chairs need to know about their role and how they might go about effectively doing this work. Chu tailors his book to department chairs who want to be “change agents” within their institutions or learn the ins and outs of this role. In the second edition, Chu has made the information he presents more accessible with tangible examples, organized lists, clear steps to processes, and questions to explore. One of the key points he makes is that a department chair’s time is precious, and because he is keenly aware of that fact, he presents information concisely and pairs it with clear takeaways and action items. New chairs will find that this book reads like a “how-to” manual for the first few weeks on the job. One could opt to read the book in its entirety, or use it more like a reference book. Utilizing the index, a new or seasoned department chair could find any topic and be immediately directed to Chu’s valuable insights about that topic as well as relevant information and practical suggestions to implement.

The book is divided into two parts: what new chairs need to know and getting started – how to make a difference. The first section provides a useful framework for how to think about the job and how to navigate this new opportunity. Chu breathes life and optimism into the role, leaving his readers feeling empowered. The second part functions as a template to prepare department chairs for success in their new role. These sections are followed by a resource list that would be helpful for those wishing to pursue more in-depth coverage of this topic. Chu intentionally delves into the practical, reserving much of the explanations of the theoretical underpinnings of his work to be explored by his readers on their own if they so choose. This will no doubt be refreshing to new chairs who want tangible strategies and practices to employ.

To that end, chapter fourteen stands out as being particularly practical. This chapter lists questions that a new department chair should seek to answer as they take on this new responsibility. This comprehensive list provides a strong foundation for any new chair, as it helps them gain information about important institutional context, budgeting, and faculty workloads and scheduling. This background knowledge, Chu suggests, is crucial for early decision-making and relationship-building within the department.

Presenting this book to new department chairs would be an efficient way to jumpstart their work and help them gain confidence as they navigate the ins and outs of their new responsibilities. As Chu emphasizes throughout the text, the work of a department chair is distinctly different from that of a professor, but much can be quickly gleaned by reading this accessible, concise primer. New department chairs who utilize the tools provided in this book will be setting themselves and their departments up for early success. The intended audience for this book is certainly those who are new to the department chair role, although veteran department chairs who are in need of fresh ideas or new strategies may find information within this work useful as well.