



BOOK REVIEW

The Essential Department Chair: A Comprehensive Desk Reference, 2nd edition

Jeffrey L. Buller

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The Essential Department Chair is a comprehensive look at the various elements that come into play in chairing a department, large or small. The book includes sections on departmental management and policies; the chair's role in faculty matters; mentoring, which includes insights on addressing conflict; faculty development; assessment; and budget and planning, with resources. The "Epilogue" discusses seven qualities of effective department chairs. For example, the essential department chair is one who "combines excellent interpersonal skills with effectiveness in seeing projects through" (457). Important in this "checklist," is self-care: maintaining a healthy work-life balance and getting out of the office on a regular basis (458).

One might not read this volume cover-to-cover, Buller suggests (xvi). One might dip into it for information on a particular issue. As a new institute director, I found the final checklist and the first section, "The Chair's Role and Career Path," strategically important. The first section points out that most people who become chairs are scholars and teachers who, usually, have no formal training in the administrative duties that become a significant part of daily routine and responsibility, and that "most chairs learn their job by observing what other chairs do and by trial and error" (4). Since the department chair leads, manages, and represents the unit, she has a strong impact. Therefore, particularly in these trying times, trial and error can be costly. To help, Buller suggests essential reading for department chairs, including publications, like *Academic Leader*, and resources, like web-based materials, and even consultants, to aid in ongoing development. He suggests that department chairs should seek mentors and take on strategic committee work to gain experience. Continued growth, he is suggesting, is important in doing effective work. Buller reminds us that a department chair is both a leader and a manager. One should know what kind of leader one is, and he offers a personal assessment instrument for thinking this through. Then Buller offers management insights on multiple practical tasks.

One very useful element of this book are the scenario analyses. These are tools that allow chairs "to develop and critique their skills as administrators, consider alternative ways of solving difficult problems, and prepare for challenging situations (75)" Each scenario involves a case study, considerations that offer questions for assessing one's initial response, and suggestions. The scenarios include issues like departmental management and politics, hiring and firing, faculty development, evaluation and assessment, strategic budgeting and planning, and others.

Jeffrey Buller is the author of many books on the arc of career of the professor. *The Essential Department Chair* is one piece of his larger, ongoing project, and a very helpful, almost encyclopedic, one. As someone entering into her first administrative role, it gave me much to think about and much to reassess. Buller focuses, helpfully, not on building grand theory, but on "proven solutions," on "what you need to know right now" (xvi) to work efficiently and fairly with others while maintaining care of the self.