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Building Credibility and Consensus as Newly-Tenured or Junior Faculty Chairs

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“Building Credibility and Consensus as Newly-Tenured or Junior Faculty Chairs”

Both Dr. Jennifer Eimers and I assumed the position of department chair as young faculty. Like most new chairs, we received no formal leadership or job training before assuming our positions. In addition to the normal learning curve that any new chair faces, we also experienced the challenge of overcoming the gap of experience and age. In our panel, we will consider the following questions: What are successful strategies for building consensus and credibility when one moves from junior faculty to chair very quickly? How do you navigate the tensions that may exist when, for example, you are evaluating your senior colleagues? Representing very different types of institutions, our presentations will engage some of the benefits and challenges presented by department culture, size, diversity, and institutional support structures.

Missouri Valley College (MVC) is a private liberal arts college founded in 1889 with an enrollment of 1400 students. Located in rural west central Missouri, MVC attracts 50 percent of its students from Missouri as well as students from across the United States and forty foreign countries. The majority of students are also NAIA athletes. Employing about 80 full-time faculty, MVC does not offer tenure. MVC currently offers one graduate program in Community Counseling and over forty baccalaureate degrees.

As the youngest and least experienced faculty member of the Division of Languages & Humanities at MVC, Dr. Jennifer Eimers assumed the role of division chair in 2010. After four years in that position, she currently is chair of the English department, comprised of 8 full-time faculty, in addition to holding two other significant administrative roles. One of the challenges of being chair at MVC is requiring professional development at an institution does not grant tenure because there are no institutional consequences for not engaging with professional and intellectual communities.

Columbus State University (CSU) is a public, regional university within the University System of Georgia. Founded in 1958, CSU enrolls more than 8,200 students in 46 undergraduate and 42 graduate degree programs. The university employs 271 full-time faculty and 198 part-time faculty.

After more than a decade as chair of CSU’s English department, comprised of 22 full-time faculty (11 tenured, 6 tenure-track) and 14 part-time faculty, my predecessor accepted an early retirement offer. In my first year as a tenured associate professor, I assumed the chair’s role in December, mid-academic year, inheriting—among other things—a budget halfway through the fiscal year. In my first full semester in the role, I completed faculty performance evaluations. Fortunately, I belong to a productive and collegial department. However, I knew that my leadership style and departmental vision differed significantly from the former chair. With no change in the chair’s position in over ten years, I wasn’t sure how these changes would be embraced.

Both Dr. Eimers and I will offer specific recommendations from our own experience that acknowledge the importance of the following: 1) establishing a strategic vision for the department; 2) serving as a model for teaching, scholarship, and service; 3) creating networks/friendships outside the department; 4) implementing your leadership style in the first year; 5) pursuing external training opportunities (both discipline-specific and general).