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Move Over or Move Out: Working Collaboratively with Former Chairs

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Transitioning into the chairperson's role is often difficult, especially for first-time chairs. Among many other things, one must quickly master new accounting and budgeting skills, and (perhaps for the first time) become proficient at human resource management. It can be exceedingly difficult to become the supervisor of long-time colleagues and friends.

Although the old adage paints former department chairpersons as the happiest people on campus, this is at least sometimes not so. It can also be daunting to resume one's research agenda after some years of administrative focus, and teaching a full load may also be a difficult adjustment. Perhaps especially challenging may be watching others assume what had been your power to make decisions.

In some cases, the ongoing presence of one's predecessor or a senior colleague who once served as chairperson is a great comfort and resource to the novice chair. In other cases, however, such a situation is fraught with tension and may make the already challenging task of managing a department an order of magnitude more difficult. The not-uncommon presence of strong personalities and egos can bring out the worst in us, especially if the transition is not the outgoing chairperson's idea. In the worst cases, unit cohesion and the proper functioning of the department may be compromised.

We consider some best practices for new chairs to follow in tackling these sometimes thorny situations. Ideally, the new chairperson will initiate an ongoing dialogue with the predecessor and find a role for him or her in the new administration that is mutually advantageous. Should constructive dialogue not be possible, we explore other options at the new chairperson's disposal.

Similarly, the outgoing chair who is returning to faculty status bears substantial responsibility for a smooth transition. As a group we will develop an actionable list of ways that senior faculty might best serve their colleagues' and departments' interests after stepping down as chairs.

What can be done at the institutional, departmental, and individual level to assure a smooth transition when the old guard won't let go? This interactive workshop will highlight institutional initiatives (e.g., development leaves, mentoring programs, crucial conversations) and personal strategies (e.g., listening tours) to help chairs claim ownership of their department. To provide a frame of reference, oral histories of former department chairs will reflect 'why' it is so difficult to let go and 'how' they want to be treated when returning to rank and file faculty. Other interactive activities will include neighbor discussions, slip writing, and role playing.