

Finding the Forest:  
*Making a Difference as Department Chair*

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AMS Workshop for Department Chairs  
San Antonio, TX  
January 9, 2015

# What are your goals?

Please spend a few minutes thinking to yourself and then talking with the people at your table about the following questions:

1. Why did you want to (or agree to) be chair?
2. What are your goals as chair?
  - ▶ Are there new initiatives you'd like to see in your department?
  - ▶ Problems you'd like to fix?
  - ▶ Existing programs you want to improve or grow?
  - ▶ Or are you hoping to simply maintain the status quo?
3. What do you see as getting in the way of your accomplishing these goals?

## Dennis Luciano: Chair at Western New England for 33 years

“He built a sensational department at a small, not terribly selective school.”

### Background:

- ▶ Joined department as its 5<sup>th</sup> faculty member in 1977
- ▶ Was told when he interviewed that the new person would be expected to become chair in 4-5 years
- ▶ Became chair as a newly-tenured associate professor in 1981

## Luciano's Goals (Western New England)

1. Diversify the faculty
  - ▶ Diversity in gender: all faculty members were male
  - ▶ Diversity in background: all faculty members (except Luciano) had at least one degree from University of Massachusetts
2. Create a computer science program
3. (later) Hire stronger faculty with a research focus
4. (later) Create an MAT program
5. (later) Create an actuarial science program

## Luciano's Successes (Western New England)

1. Current PhD-faculty size is 12, with 4 women.  
PhDs from 12 different institutions (from across the country)
2. Computer science program is thriving, broke off as its own department in 2007
3. Two current faculty members have NSF grants for research
4. MAT program with 30 students currently enrolled
5. Actuarial science program is still developing, work being continued under direction of new chair

# Luciano's Biggest Challenge (Western New England)

## Working with the Administration

- ▶ Example: Administration was adamantly against creation of MAT program
  - ▶ Built coalitions with local school districts
  - ▶ New administration was supportive!
- ▶ Advice:
  - ▶ Keep calm
  - ▶ Work with the administration
  - ▶ Be proactive
  - ▶ Accept that there will be decisions made that will upset you.
  - ▶ Be willing to take a stand on things that are important to you/your department
  - ▶ Maintain collegiality and respect the chain of command

## Luciano's Advice to Chairs

Hiring faculty is the most important thing in a chair's job.

Hiring the right people will

- ▶ elevate the image of the department within the university, regionally, and nationally
- ▶ lessen distractions, because good faculty will naturally do a good job
- ▶ enable further successes

“Good hires make life easy for a chair.”

## Kurt Cogswell: Head at South Dakota State for 10 years (so far)

“He made significant improvements  
despite university changes of focus.”

### Background:

- ▶ Came late to mathematics (was 40 when he took his first tenure-track position)
- ▶ Became interim department head after 7 years in department
- ▶ Served as interim for one year, then took job “for real”
- ▶ Previous department head had been head for 24 years

# Cogswell's Goals and Successes (South Dakota State)

1. Cause students at all levels to learn more mathematics, at a higher level of rigor
  - ▶ Established a PhD program in mathematics
  - ▶ Established a MS program in statistics
  - ▶ Starting a MS program in data science
  - ▶ Strengthened the MS program in mathematics
  - ▶ Strengthened BS program in mathematics with career-centered "Concentration Areas"
  - ▶ Hired more and stronger faculty
2. Improve post-graduation student outcomes
  - ▶ More students are going to graduate school in mathematics
  - ▶ Students entering the workforce are taking degree-related positions (as opposed to generic employment)

# Cogswell's Biggest Challenges (South Dakota State)

## Administrivia, Glacial Timelines

- ▶ But the administrivia is necessary to move the big ideas forward
- ▶ Be patient; don't get easily discouraged
- ▶ Have or develop a *leadership team*
  - ▶ Assign authority to others and then **get out of the way**
  - ▶ Back your team up even if you don't agree with their decisions (within reason)

# Cogswell's Advice to Chairs

1. "Get the goal right"
  - ▶ Be passionate about your goals
  - ▶ Align your goals with campus priorities
  - ▶ Get others invested in the goals (may require flexibility!)
2. "Get the people right"
  - ▶ Delegate
  - ▶ Work hard to get faculty buy-in
  - ▶ Be a team player on your campus
3. "Get your attitude right"
  - ▶ Achieve your goals by enabling your colleagues to do good things
  - ▶ Promote your colleagues to the administration
  - ▶ Use the goal as motivation to get through the administrivia

## Jim Lewis: Chair at Nebraska for 15 years

“He transformed Nebraska from a little-known department to a premier place to study math”

Background:

- ▶ Spent the year prior to becoming chair as President of the Faculty Senate
  - ▶ Put energy into developing relationships with the administration
  - ▶ Led a campus-wide faculty salary initiative: Nebraska's salaries ranked 163<sup>rd</sup> out of 168 PhD-granting universities nationally; worked with Legislature to create a 34% increase over 3 years
- ▶ “I became a conductor because I couldn't play an instrument.”

## Lewis's Goals (Nebraska)

“A chair has three responsibilities.”

1. Act as a conduit between the university and the faculty
  - ▶ Understand the university's mission and goals
  - ▶ Understand the goals and ambitions of the faculty
  - ▶ Advocate for each to the other, help merge the goals
2. Create an environment in which talented people can achieve
  - ▶ Remove barriers to success
3. Find the necessary resources to do these things

## Lewis's Successes (Nebraska)

1. Greatly enhanced the department's national reputation
  - ▶ Supportive of women (Presidential Award, NCUWM)
  - ▶ Dramatically stronger research department
  - ▶ Existence proof that there need not be an either/or relationship between undergraduate teaching and research/graduate education
2. Made some "great hires"
  - ▶ "Make the best you can with what you've got, but the opportunity to hire is important out of proportion to everything else."
3. Built a University of Nebraska Foundation presence for mathematics (development)

## Lewis's Advice to Chairs

1. Read *Towards Excellence*.
2. Have a good sense of what matters.
3. Fly under the radar sometimes: make change quietly and then people will accept it.
4. Announce change sometimes: collect buy-in and make the change a goal shared by the entire department.
5. Whenever possible, use a carrot rather than a stick.
6. There are times when you should back off and accept defeat, but **there are times when you must go all in.**

## Back to work

Please talk with your tables about these three case studies.

1. What has been (do you expect to be) similar in your experiences as chair as compared to theirs?
2. What has been (do you expect to be) different?
3. What advice “hit home” for you?
4. Do you disagree with any of their advice?

## Creating an Action Plan

Please return to thinking about your own goals as chair and the obstacles you face. Write down

- ▶ Three specific goals you want to accomplish
- ▶ A few challenges you expect to face
- ▶ Some strategies you plan to follow for handling those challenges

Then talk with your table about what you have.