Routine Practices of Effective Department Chairs

We often hear, “We’d like to do business differently, but we can’t afford it.” While time is money, spending time on faculty workplace issues is crucial to the bottom line. The academic workplace and the context for academic work are changing faster than most of us think -- a result of outside forces, including demography, the economy, and technology. So what are good chairs doing to cultivate faculty success?

Creating a welcoming and nurturing departmental climate
- Pay attention: have an open door; stop by and talk with pre-tenure faculty; make sure all is well
- Signal that it is OK to ask questions or to ask for resources (“Just make the case”)
- Recognize colleagues; offer encouragement
- Develop chairs to succeed you – and teach them to nurture new faculty

Providing mentors/fostering networks
- Ensure all faculty have at least one mentor, check in to see how it’s working out
- Match pre-tenure faculty with tenured faculty who share research interests or who can provide teaching guidance
- Help junior colleagues make connections that foster cross-department and interdisciplinary collaborations
- Invite a tenured faculty member from outside institution (in the same field as a pre-tenure faculty member) to campus to spend a day or two discussing his/her research and giving feedback

Being clear regarding the interpretation of policies and practices
- Communicate frequently – in person, in writing – to pre-tenure and tenured faculty
- Provide sample dossiers of successful tenure bids
- Provide clearly-articulated, written, and fully-distributed departmental policy for tenuring faculty with joint appointments (e.g., a Memorandum of Understanding)

Providing consistent support
- Have pre-tenure faculty establish 3- and 5-year plans and help them work the plan
- Host monthly, informal brown-bag lunches with pre-tenure faculty; then meet each individually once per semester
- Tell faculty when they should hold off on developing new courses to focus on research
- Talk to new faculty about which committees are worthwhile; give them permission to “blame the chair” when declining

Providing teaching support
- Hold discussions with all faculty in the department around how teaching assignments are made, keeping it transparent and equitable (load/level)
- Share notes on core courses with new faculty and review exams for appropriate level of difficulty
- Pair senior with junior faculty to “team teach” a course during first year on campus

Providing research support
- Encourage new faculty to apply for awards, RFPs, grant announcements that come to office
- Offer to lend equipment/supplies, work with tenured faculty to assist in this
- Read manuscripts, research proposals, and petition publishers/presses on behalf of faculty
- Sponsor substantive brown bag sessions: Grant Writing 101, Supervising grad students, Managing a lab, Inbox Zero