

DEPARTMENT HEAD HANDOFF BOOK

This document is intended to help onboard a new DH. In this first iteration it just reflects one DH's perspective, but I hope it can be enriched and passed on for future handoffs. It has these sections:

1. Overall advice
2. Biggest responsibilities in a normal year
3. Especially sensitive items
4. Basic guidance on class scheduling

OVERALL ADVICE

Be ready for complex responsibilities. The most obvious difference between the DH role and normal faculty work is responsibility for a much larger range of items. You will drop some balls in any case, but that can be minimized if you take time on the front end to prepare yourself for that flow. For example:

- Create a well-organized folder on your computer for department business. To give you a sense of what that could look like, I have subfolders for: Admissions, Advising, Budget, CAS/UO meetings, Committees, Curriculum/scheduling, Dashboards/data/metrics, Diversity and inclusion, Governance docs and program eval, Grad program/GEs, Internships, Meetings/events/speakers, Partnerships, Personnel faculty, Personnel staff, Reforms, Reporting of incidents, Searches, Strategy/donors/fundraising, Travel, Webpage and logistics. Of these, the largest folders are Curriculum/scheduling and Personnel faculty.
- Consciously adopt work habits to handle this flow. Choose a regular time of day to clear out department emailing and tasks. Either move items along, put them in an active task list, or put a note in your calendar to revisit them on a certain date.
- Respond quickly on small/unsensitive items but take your time with sensitive ones. Outside of your designated clearing-out time, live by the "two minute rule": if you can respond to something in two minutes or less, do it now. When something comes in that is complex or sensitive, however, it is often good not to respond too quickly. Give yourself time to reflect or consult, and other parties time to cool down.

Cultivate your partnership with the Department Manager. Given this complexity, you need the professional administrative expertise of the Department Manager constantly and profoundly. Only after doing this job for a while will you realize how little you knew about the university and how much the DM knows. Consult/inform the DM on practically everything. Meet weekly, typically for about 1.5 hours. Keep a running list of items to bring to these weekly meetings. Copy the DM on all emails unless there is a specific reason not to (most commonly, an email from you may appear gentler to someone if the DM isn't copied—but don't overuse that logic, because then too much information gets scattered). Respond as rapidly as possible to the DM's emails to avoid holding up important processes.

Recognize that rules are your friend. Your legitimacy depends on always, always being able to tell people how you arrived at a given action/decision and why that process was defensible. Check in with the DM constantly to be sure what policy is written down about a given issue; how it has been approached more informally in the past; or to consider how to approach it in the absence of such policy or precedents. This is most important when granting exceptions to normal rules: the key question you face is how to

construct a rule that justifies an exception but could be applied to future instances without eviscerating the normal rules and opening you up to accusations of bias or arbitrariness.

Consult as much as you can and as early as you can. This may be the hardest part of the job. Given a constant flow of stuff, it is very tempting just to fire off an email on each item. Often you must do that—you don't have time to consult on everything—but whenever things seem potentially sensitive, you will save time and grief if you consider whom to most appropriately consult and give them a call, knock on their door, or at least send an initial email to get their thoughts.

- This is especially hard because faculty think they don't want the DH to make decisions and that they should be consulted, but are also often unavailable or annoyed to be bugged with consultations. They aren't being specifically compensated for such service (whereas you are being compensated for your DH work, to some degree). Err nonetheless on the side of asking them for more consultation, and be ready to discount their evident annoyance or having to bug them to respond on these consultations.
- In terms of whom/how to consult, generally ask the DM for guidance about how something similar has been approached in the past. Don't hesitate to ask the Divisional Dean. Sometimes it is helpful to turn to DHs in other departments, especially more experienced ones.
 - The Personnel Committee is your main consultative body vis-à-vis faculty. I strongly recommend that you schedule monthly meetings for Personnel for the whole year. It is easier to cancel one of these meetings than to figure out the timing for each meeting.
 - Consult the DM on items that have administrative, HR, and/or financial implications. Some items may seem purely academic on the surface but actually have administrative implications for staff workload or other policies and precedents that need attention.

Be aware that faculty will see you differently. You will not have the impression that you have much power as DH. It will feel like you are mostly doing administrative work to keep trains running on time or putting out fires; you barely have any opportunity to push an agenda, and chances are you don't really come in with one. Whatever the truth of that, faculty will perceive you as powerful and feel vulnerable to you, and your relationships with them will change while in this position. It is helpful to be aware of this, and to be sensitive to a level of vulnerability that may seem surprising from your point of view.

Prioritize acknowledgement and empathy before concrete response. You'll get many requests or concerns where you can't ultimately do what someone is asking for. You'll get some that you think make no sense. Often people don't fully understand their own issue, let alone available and appropriate solutions for it. It is crucial to see that they're always seeking acknowledgment, but that their feasible and legitimate need for something more concrete is often less clear. Be quick to offer acknowledgement and empathy and slower and more deliberate about concrete responses. If you jump too quickly to concrete-response mode, you'll often find yourself telling them that their concern or proposal doesn't quite make sense, which never helps.

When real problems arise, take notes and seek deans' guidance. If you have a difficult conversation with a faculty member, write down your quick account of it afterward. Let the Divisional Dean know about difficult interactions sooner rather than later. Get their perspective and guidance early.

BIGGEST RESPONSIBILITIES IN A NORMAL YEAR

This section highlights how the biggest regular tasks hit over the arc of an academic year.

- September-November: Search, if one is happening. Check in with the search committee regularly, even if this annoys them, to make sure they are doing what they need to do. Bobbles in this process can create huge problems for the department's ability to make a good hire. Be especially consultative in all directions if any issues/questions come up in these processes, since they are very high stakes. Follow written rules to the letter.
- September-November: tenure/promotion processes, if they are happening. Again, make sure that committees move their responsibilities along. For the very important DH letter on these cases, make sure you either employ an existing template/model (from a previous review) or very consciously create one in consultation with the DM. This will help you treat all cases similarly.
- November-December: formulate department requests for future hires, to feed into the Institutional Hiring Plan. This is typically due to CAS in early-mid December. Often the actual deadline is announced later than you'd like, so don't wait for it to build in a late-fall department meeting for this purpose.
- Late November into early January: Schedule classes for next year. This is the single biggest task you tackle as DH. It is a challenging puzzle with many opportunities for mistakes, some of which can create serious resentment. Some very basic guidance is appended at the end of this document, though this is so complex that you'll just have to walk through it with the DM to really get it. You'll work especially closely with the DM on this and summer scheduling.
- Late November into early January: Schedule classes for the coming summer. Summer enrollments are crucial because they provide the main source of all our discretionary funds that cover things like faculty travel funds, speaker series, grad student research support and awards. This is not that complex a puzzle, but it needs especially careful attention.
- February-April: budgeting. For you the key element is that we formulate a request to CAS for NTTF hiring for the next year. This has to be worked out as a function of scheduling for next year's classes and in light of sabbaticals, leaves, and other needs. You work with the DM to produce a carefully-constructed pitch to CAS about why we need certain NTTF teaching.
- February-March: Grad admissions. The Admissions & Awards committee ranks candidates but then the DH consults with the DM and Graduate Coordinator on how many offers to send out, and how to roll out more offers as we get responses. The DH sends out the actual offers—which requires great care in working with the Graduate Coordinator, because the offers are often very slightly different—and coordinates with the DGS on communications with recruits. The grad recruitment weekend, typically on Thursday-Friday of week 9 in Winter term, also requires considerable attention.
- February-April: reviews. The heaviest reviews are 3-year post-tenure reviews, which the DH does alone. A bit lighter are 6-year PTRs: they are done by the Personnel Committee, but the DH writes their own evaluation after the committee report, which ends up being close to the effort of a 3rd year review. OA reviews are somewhat easier. Annual required reviews for assistant professors are lighter, as are annual required reviews for NTTF, but should of course be done very carefully.

ESPECIALLY SENSITIVE ITEMS

This section tries to highlight the items where may be easiest to misstep as DH, whether or not the items themselves are very important. Watch out for these things and approach them carefully.

- Random faculty requests. You will get an erratic flow of requests from faculty: I really need to have a lighter service load this year; I want this GE to work for me; can we please give an exception to this student; can I use my travel funds in this unusual way; please acknowledge voluntarily-chosen activity X as explicitly deserving of recognition as part of my job; and so on. The upside of these requests is small (you don't get a lot of credit for accommodating people) and the downside is large (you can easily generate resentment or set a precedent that will cause other resentments down the line—often both at once!).
 - Follow the advice above about acknowledgement and empathy first. Do not promise concrete things up front. Consult with the DM (and others as necessary) to work out rules by which accommodations are justified or refused. In some cases, requests may also need to be evaluated by the Personnel Committee.
 - It is important to recognize that people have widely different perceptions of rules in general. Many have difficulty understanding why their request for an exception shouldn't be granted even if there is no good reason for it, just because they (or the person they're advocating for) really want the exception. You'll hear many arguments that are essentially about "victimless decisions": who is hurt by being nice this time? Be very wary and remember that rules are your friends. Again, a specific exception is effectively altering the rule, and often comes back to bite you when another similar situation comes along and people have found out what was done the previous time. Any poorly-justified exception also undermines your overall ability to simply apply existing rules in a straightforward and systematic way. Once everything is a special case, everything has to be bargained out or decided arbitrarily, and you bear more and more responsibility for every choice.
- Faculty-staff relations. Faculty are busy, often stressed people who have rarely worked in a non-academic context. Even political scientists typically haven't thought much about how the organization around them works. The staff are integral to administering the university's missions, both for getting things done and making sure that we don't break policies or laws. But faculty often experience interactions with staff as constraints on their extremely self-defined work, and may not spend much time thinking about the necessity and usefulness (for them and for all) of such constraints. This can come out in problematic treatment of staff.
 - The most common thing is simply ignoring emails from staff. Many times every term, staff will report that a faculty member has not responded to three emails on some necessary process. Our process is that the DH is pinged to step in at that point. Faculty typically respond quickly to these DH emails—which underscores a lack of respect for staff. I reluctantly found myself forced to keep a log of such instances, and I advise that you do so as well. I didn't like keeping that record, but realized it was necessary when I remarked on this gently to a faculty member who constantly received such DH emails, and the person insisted that they weren't aware of any such pattern. Once you have

such a log, you will see patterns in who treats staff communications with respect and who doesn't. These patterns closely predict other tensions in faculty-staff relations.

- Making sure that staff are treated with respect is an important DH responsibility in its own right. In a more self-interested sense, you depend so heavily on the staff that you need them to work well with you and be happy in their jobs (assuming you have a good team of people, which we do right now). One of the worst things that could happen to you as DH is major turnover in staff.
- Reviews. These are less constant than the previous two items, thankfully, but of course major moments of evaluation are especially sensitive. As a (quasi-) elected leader of the faculty, you're in a difficult position when called upon to evaluate them, but you must try to approach this responsibility rigorously. Evaluations will always go on to other people outside the department, so the DH doesn't do faculty or the department any favors if reviews don't come across as compelling at those levels. More than just about anything else, clear and rigorous reviews build credibility and political capital with the higher administration. A good question to pose as you write a review: would random person X from another research university see this as credible?
- Grad-student concerns about transparency and input. Everybody knows how hard it can be to be a PhD student. Their stress and vulnerability come out in a regular stream of concerns and inquiries to the DH. Frequently they express that things happen that they don't know about and that they don't have enough of a voice in the department. They typically do not like the idea that as students who stay for a (relatively) brief time, it makes sense that they have less standing in decision-making than faculty or staff. Though they have no service expectations and face strong challenges finishing the PhD under the best of circumstances, they often seek involvement without much self-protection for their time. It is well worth spending some time to receive such inquiries with acknowledgement and empathy, and it is useful to schedule an annual discussion with the Grad Council (and occasional discussions with particular grad students who contact you) to hear their concerns.
- Distribution of funds or TTF administrative appointments. When we have calls for research funds or other goodies, or seek nominations for roles like ADH, DGS, or DUS, there is always room for misunderstandings. Follow/construct systematic processes for these decisions, consult proactively, and be very responsive to any concerns about them.
- Elections to committees. Elections to the Personnel and Merit Pay committees can sometimes ambush you. The main cause is that elections can get weird with a very small pool of candidates and voters. Faculty want these elected posts to represent the department (in terms of subfield, gender, race, occasionally of less obvious perceived factions), but the pool of people who are available and willing to stand at any moment can make that difficult. Such problems need to be recognized and addressed by paying close attention to the pool of candidates and nudging other people into it as necessary, or by consulting with faculty to make sure that they recognize that the pool is restricted before seeing the outcome of the election.

BASIC GUIDANCE ON CLASS SCHEDULING

This is the DH's most complex task. The DM or Graduate Coordinator will provide you with information about faculty preferences; courses that need to be covered; past enrollments; advanced grad students' teaching preferences; and rules on time-zone distribution requirements.

- Begin by taking faculty requests and putting them in a spreadsheet, as if everyone was getting exactly what they request. Include a notes column to make initial observations as you fill this in.
- Consider courses that must be covered and who can cover them. Note that no TTF should teach during department meeting time or speaker series slots (though occasional exceptions to the latter are sometimes unavoidable). This has the unfortunate but unavoidable consequence that some courses by retired faculty, NTF or grad students must be scheduled during these times.
- Be aware that faculty who are teaching 5 courses may request to "stack" three to create a 2-3 load and open up a "research term," if they provide a research justification for it. These requests can be accommodated if it works for the department; they are not an entitlement. Faculty teaching 4 courses may not stack (they must teach 2-2 or 2-1-1). The main reason for limiting stacking for 4-course situations is that stacks create scheduling problems: someone with three classes in a term has more fixed points that limit the number of solutions (since their classes can't be on top of each other). If we had more than one or two such people in any given term, scheduling would become extremely difficult or impossible. A second reason is that it is hard to teach three classes in a term, and teaching quality presumably suffers.
 - See department rule on stacking at <https://casitweb.uoregon.edu/psforms/faculty-net/teaching-service-and-responsibilities>.
- Pay attention to offering sufficient grad seminars with the best possible distribution of number/subfield across terms. These are especially important to figure out early, because they often require specific people; they block out 3-hour periods that affect when faculty can teach other things; and we try to minimize overlap between seminars so that grad students can take them all freely. There is more wiggle room in most undergrad assignments.
- Make sure that across terms we are offering reasonable numbers of seats at 100, 200, 300, 400 level, in light of recent enrollments. Fall seats should be especially robust, both because that is when we see the most students and because the university premises certain measures on Fall enrollments (so we have incentives to have seats in Fall). Spring enrollments tend to be lower than other terms.
- As you come close to an initial solution for these issues of substantive distributions, take a pass to consider "zone distributions" of classes across time blocks. We must come close to certain distributions or the university will refuse our room requests. Staff will provide special spreadsheets for mapping this out. Time slots require special sensitivity to faculty preferences. Some faculty like teaching in early morning, for example, and others hate it. Some faculty are generally very picky about time slots and others are easy. Consult early and frequently to make sure you understand what faculty care about, but also remember that these are requests, not entitlements. The department has the right to assign anyone to any of these times. In the long run, try not to abuse the easy-going people by giving them bad time slots.
- After you have your first draft, request that the DM and Graduate Coordinator review the draft and offer feedback.