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Effective Department Meetings: The right approach varies

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A common challenge for chairs is conducting effective and efficient department meetings. Challenges range from determining how frequently to meet to developing an agenda to managing discussion and debate. Chairs must balance the use of meeting time for the dissemination of information with the need to gather faculty input. They need to allow ideas and opinions to be expressed while keeping the group on topic and the conversation moving forward in a productive way.

Based on a review of the literature on effective department meetings, we developed a short survey that allows chairs to self-assess their planning and management skills for meetings. This assessment also served as a stimulus for discussion among chairs about effective approaches to handling meeting challenges during a session of our Chair Professional Development Program. We have learned that department meetings vary greatly by individual chair and department. So although challenges may be similar for many chairs, there may be a variety of creative ways to respond to those issues. In other words, there is not one clear right way to plan and manage effective department meetings. However, we have identified a number of chair behaviors that can be implemented in different situations in order to facilitate more efficient and effective meeting outcomes.

In our workshop, we will quickly review literature on effective department meetings and offer audience members a number of positive and instrumental approaches to meeting planning and meeting management. We will share our self-assessment survey with attendees so they can examine their own approaches and strategies for effective meetings. The self-assessment is also designed to prompt new ideas that they may not have considered, and it will serve as a stimulus to discussion among small groups who will be invited to dissect and discuss several real-world scenarios. Each group will examine their own approaches and consider the effectiveness of the various approaches outlined in the self-assessment. The goal will be for attendees to generate strategies for handling similar situations that they are likely to encounter.

Although there may not be one right way to conduct a meeting, a tailored, intentional meeting structure and practiced strategic behavior can provide department chairs and other administrators with the structure necessary to confidently manage a meeting even when, or perhaps especially when, discussing difficult or sensitive issues.