

What Deans Want in Chairs: What is Competency in Chairs and How to Get the Needed Skills

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Learning Objectives: As a result of attending this session, participants will be able to 1) identify a list of common skills/attributes needed in order to be an effective chair, 2) articulate the competencies in which they perceive they have strength as well as those competencies that may need further development, and 3) consult selected resources to assist in their leadership development.

Summary: Today, academic department chairs are expected to be competent in multiple aspects of the enterprise of academic medical centers, which includes but is not limited to securing funding, reducing costs, recruiting and managing a diverse faculty and staff, developing innovative educational practice, strategic and business planning, conflict management, and negotiation skills. As a result, department chairs have tremendous influence in academic health centers, yet data indicate that they are often underprepared to take on these important leadership roles due to a lack of understanding of the skills need to be a successful chair as well as limited or no training in leadership. Further, even after starting in their new roles, chairs often receive little training or feedback, and may struggle to transition smoothly into their new leadership role.

In an effort to support department chairs, the Indiana University School of Medicine Office of Faculty Affairs and Professional Development reviewed relevant literature from the last 15 years in both academic medicine and higher education as whole that examined the attributes of successful department chairs and other academic leaders. This review included research studies as well as general perspectives and firsthand commentaries about the roles and responsibilities of these leaders. To arrive at a set of leadership competencies for department chairs, we discussed the crosscutting themes from the literature. Once we established our initial set of themes, we evaluated the extent to which these attributes matched those of our most effective department chairs and sought feedback from institutional leaders.

The six competencies, presented in Table 1, were ultimately informed by both a review of relevant literature and our experiences as faculty development professionals who are involved in both the recruitment and development of chairs and other academic leaders. These competencies now form the basis for our department chair recruitment, development, and feedback process. Table 1 lists the competencies we identified as well as a subset of skills associated with each competency, and some of the literature that inspired us to include the competency in our model.

Table 1. Leadership competencies developed by the Indiana University School of Medicine used to recruit, develop, and give feedback to chairs

Leadership Competencies	Example of Included Skills
Leadership and team development	Engages in succession planning Creates leadership opportunities for others Serves as a mentor and/or sponsor Sets tone of equitable and supportive climate for all
Performance and talent management	Encourages faculty development Effectively recruits and supports faculty and learners Provides ongoing feedback Empowers others
Vision and strategic planning	Establishes shared vision Inspires others toward a common goal Encourages innovation Fiscally responsible
Emotional intelligence	Is self-reflective Serves as a role model Open to views of others Committed to enhancing diversity
Communication skills	Articulates a vision Negotiates for resources and support Actively listens Engages others in decision making
Commitment to the tripartite mission	Insists that department advance all three missions Integrates department goals with stakeholder goals Advances community of scholars across mission areas Can meet the needs of a changing environment

It should be noted that rather than focus on a very specific skill (e.g., managing a budget), we developed broader categories and then worked to define the subset of skills associated with each competency.

Strategically attending to the way that chairs are selected, developed, and given feedback has tremendous potential to increase the success of chairs and, in turn, to constructively shape the culture of AHCs. Further, with the knowledge of the competencies needed to be effective chairs themselves can take action to develop their skills as a means to thrive in their leadership role.

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Additional Resources:

- Association of American Medical Colleges – [National Leadership Development Programs List](#)
- Wiley - [The Department Chair](#)

Suggested Reading:

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