

Spring 2009 • An Open Forum for Faculty at Santa Rosa Junior College • April 15, 2009

THE AFA DIALOGUE HAS BEEN CREATED TO AIR CONCERNS OF ALL FACULTY. THE AFA UPDATE WILL CONTINUE TO BE THE FACTUAL VOICE OF THE AFA, WHILE THE AFA DIALOGUE WILL ENCOURAGE CONVERSATION AND PUBLISH PERSONAL OPINIONS ABOUT WORKPLACE ISSUES AND POLITICAL CONCERNS. WE INVITE ANY FACULTY MEMBER TO SUBMIT LETTERS, ARTICLES, OR OPINION PIECES. AFA RESERVES EDITORIAL PREROGATIVES.

MESSAGE FROM THE AFA PUBLICATIONS COMMITTEE

The following is the first in a series of articles that will focus on a day in the life of a department chair.

ON BEING A CHAIR

by Susan Wilson, PhD., Regular Faculty, Biology, and Chair, Life Sciences Department.

To be or not to be. I remember clearly when that was my question. All of the senior members of my department had done their turn and were planning retirements. I was up next, and my first response was to desperately seek someone else to do it. There was one person who was only sort of part of my department, but very knowledgeable and experienced in administration. And she said no. Before I continue with a brief story of my experience, I must qualify some things. My experiences may not be like those of anyone else, and my department will be similar to only a few others on campus. The Life Sciences Department is an academic department offering two majors. We teach no vocational classes, offer no certificates, have no advisory boards. We do not put on any performances, and while there are sometimes animals that live with us, they do not require stalls, arenas or pastures. We *do* have several dead human bodies, but that is another story. There are 10 full-time faculty, about twenty adjunct faculty and six classified staff members. One major is designed for students who will transfer to four-year universities as biology majors; the second is for those attempting to enter allied health programs. We have one large general education class: 30 sections of introductory biology/semester.

I have been department chair for five and a half years, and will continue for a third term starting next fall. I mention this so that you will realize that I actually enjoy this job (I could have said no), and that my memory of the first days, months, even years has been softened and warped by time.



When I became chair, I was given no introduction, no training, no help or advice from the previous chair. The department office was in chaos. The first decision I remember making was to write a newsletter, a practice I have continued ever since. It is called "News from the Chair", I write it myself and do not incorporate other people's opinions, it usually covers what went on in department meetings but I write whenever I think there is a need, it is sent out electronically. I consider it the best practice I have come up with. It provides all members of the department critical information and news about department plans that may affect them (most adjuncts and staff can't come to meetings), but also provides a written record of what has gone on in the department. This can be passed on to the next chair, and the next. The second action I clearly remember is sitting down with the AFA contract and reading my job description over and over, and making lists of what chairs and departments are supposed to do. Then I methodically set out to do everything on the list, which of course took years.

My To-Do list looked like this – expressed as questions, followed by actions I took.

COMMUNICATION

Does everyone know about department business? Policies? Do we communicate with current and new students effectively? Are new faculty mentored? We hold regular department meetings – one/month, I write a newsletter, our AA has prepared a packet of information for new faculty, we have a website with a current list of faculty, information on our majors, FAQ.

SCHEDULE

Is it designed to meet student needs? Do all faculty hear about hourly assignments? Are there new ideas to try? Does it get to the dean on time with no errors? Scheduling is one area that I did have training and experience before becoming chair. I volunteered to help the previous chair with this task. It took time, but I changed from a paper distribution to excel spreadsheets to develop the schedule and send it out to all faculty for discussion. One colleague has taken on the hardest part of this task, collaborating with other departments in our cluster so that the bio majors students can fit in their math, physics and chemistry classes around their biology classes.

CURRICULUM

Is every course outline current? (And more recently do they have SLO's!?)

Is there curriculum we should discuss and update? Are there courses we could terminate?

I joined the CRC as the easiest way to master this stuff, by osmosis; I instituted a year long discussion of our biology majors sequence, terminated many courses that had not been

(continued on page 2)

ON BEING A CHAIR *(cont. from page 1)*

taught in years, developed a plan for updating all CO's, writing as many as I could myself, I helped write our two majors.

EVALUATIONS

Are we current? I keep tracking records, wrote the policy for choosing evaluators, inform everyone who is doing what evaluation every semester in the newsletter, try to distribute the workload evenly and fairly.

POLICIES

What are we supposed to have policies on? I updated or wrote them, presented them for a vote, filed them with the appropriate office (e.g. HR, AA).

PLANNING

What do we need in terms of new faculty? Classified staff? Facilities? Instructional equipment? How can I best present our case? I have written six faculty staffing requests and all were granted. I have tried to write classified staff requests and some have worked out; others require an endless jump through hoops every semester. I have asked for more funds and also wrote a successful grant to update lab equipment. I try hard to make sure that we have done all the work required of departments before we start asking for more stuff. I volunteered to write one of the first two PRPPs.

BUDGET

Do we have tracking procedures? Stay within our budget, have enough money? This is my weakest area by far, but we were blessed with a new AA who is a master in this area, and a faculty member who spearheaded a major presentation on our budget woes to our administrators; the AA developed a new and improved tracking system and delegation of budget responsibilities that have served the department very well.

SERVICE

Does my department serve the college community? We have faculty serving on academic senate, CRC, calendar committee. We present at Day Under the Oaks every year, started a steward's program at the Pepperwood

Preserve, teach in the study abroad program, and serve in the new faculty mentor program.

Starting out, I did not have a specific goal, a philosophy, or even a plan. It all evolved, slowly, organically. But six years in I can say that I do have a way of approaching things that has served me well. It matches my personality and way of doing things, but obviously it won't work for everyone. My most important rule is that whenever there is a challenging personnel issue, I immediately confer with the president of AFA. This saved me many mistakes – my own immediate reactions rarely matched the contract. A second useful rule is that whenever there is work to be done that involves writing a document, I write a draft and then ask for feedback. Delegating such tasks, or writing by committee, is something I do not think works very well.

I have learned the phenomenal importance of good hiring. The essential rule is to screen for competence in a discipline, and then weigh personality much more heavily than a particular degree or number of years of experience. It is far easier to get a divorce than to fire someone from SRJC. Which gets to the second essential rule. If you discover that things are not going well, let someone go in the first year, when it is relatively easy. People can learn new skills fairly easily; changing core personality traits requires many, many years of psychotherapy (i.e. it is not going to happen!).

I have also come to value working collaboratively with administrators. My experience has been that they are not the enemy to be fought, and I have come to value their bigger picture view of problems. There is a fairly long list of things on their checklist for departments to do, some make sense to me, some don't. But unless I want to work to change them, I jump through the hoops of being a member of this society, one that I want to be accredited and run with the ultimate goal of serving students.

The most significant thing I have learned is the value of collective wisdom. I have brought many problems and challenges to

department meetings, sometimes adding my ideas for solutions, sometimes just sitting and listening. Every time much better solutions emerged after we all talked than I could have ever come up with on my own. I have blind spots, I forget things, I fail to take into account one part of the equation. Together, we have done very well, and usually reach consensus. When that is not possible we vote, and abide by the decision.

I have learned many things from many people in the last six years. I am deeply grateful to my colleagues – I have learned the most from them. One has inspired my teaching – he is a far better teacher than anyone I had in five years earning a PhD at UCB. Another will tell me the truth, no matter what, and even when I do not want to hear it. With another I can say my truth, however bizarre, and I am heard and not judged. I have learned from administrators – I asked one about trying a new role – she asked, “Is there something you want to accomplish?” I realized that there really was not, and decided not to go there. But here, in my department and in my classes, there *is* something I want to accomplish and I am grateful for the privilege to try every day. Another administrator gave me advice during the worst challenge of my career here – go home and have a scotch. And that turned out to be great advice also.

In the last six years my department has undergone a wonderful transformation. There have been challenges and problems. They were solved in part by applying all the tips listed above, and in part by luck! My part has included lots of hard work, an attempt to not take things personally and not be attached to any of my own ideas, and a genuine desire to be of service. I hope in the next few years we will focus even more on our most important goal, serving students. The role of department chair certainly includes listening respectfully to complaints and developing a schedule and programs that serve student needs. Most critical is taking any opportunity to inspire myself and my colleagues to stay current and passionate about our discipline, biology.