

3 things I wish I said at the Leadership Panel Discussion on Thursday

By Janet Ready, Faculty and justfinishedchairterm, Recreation Studies Dept.

I had the opportunity to be on a panel at the end of the Faculty Leadership day at Langara on Thursday. I was Department Chair of Recreation Studies for 6 years and just turned over to our new Dept. Chair, Erin Wilkins on May 1st. Participating in the panel was a great opportunity for me to reflect on some key questions that Gerda posed about being Dept. Chair. After the panel – I thought a lot on the experience and felt like I wanted to share something a bit more articulate. Maybe with the hindsight that comes from not being in the fire of being Dept. Chair – so here are some thoughts – you are welcome to take them or leave them – but they are shared in the spirit of supporting you in your Dept. Chair/ Coordinator role:

You are doing important work

I don't think this gets said enough at Langara. I think there are different faculty dynamics in different departments and a disparity of what release time Chairs get to do the work – so there are some structural issues -- But your work as a Department Chair is important to your faculty team, it is important to the students and it is important to the College. It is worthy work. It is frustrating/crazygoingaroundincircles work a lot of the time – but you are the leader for your Department and you get to lead the vision and there is a lot of value in that. It is so easy to get caught up in the nuts and bolts – scheduling meetings, scheduling classes, hiring, evaluation, and lose perspective of the importance of your work as Department Chair or Coordinator in the bigger picture of how the College works.

Share the Love

Sometimes as Dept. Chair, I was my own worst enemy because I felt like I needed to do everything on my own....and yes, I had the release time and the stipend – but I realized quickly that it was in my best interest to include my faculty in what I was working on – through small conversations or update emails.

Share what you are doing as the Chair – not just the really hard stuff – but the really good moments too – the things that lift you up – like student successes, cool professional development, a good teaching moment, a good meeting. It takes the mystery out of the Chair job and helps to give everyone a vested interest in what is happening in the Dept.

One person asked about how you get faculty to do Dept. work in their NID time. I think we can work to create a culture that understands what needs to be done for the Dept. Write it into your interview questions. Hire people who understand that supporting the Department and doing Dept. work is part of their job. As Erin said on the panel, find out what they like to do and connect that to what needs to be done for the Department. You see the big picture and can see how your faculty can use their strengths to support the Dept.

Plan your succession. Our Collective Agreement says that Department Chairs can only work two consecutive terms of 3 years each – than it needs to go to someone else (Yay!!). Figure out who the next Chair will be and create a pathway and support to get there. The really good thing about this is that it creates more people in your Department who see a bigger picture of the college and understand the Challenges of being Dept. Chair.

Build your team – not just your faculty team – but your support team

At the end of the panel discussion on Thursday, Dawn Palmer reflected that a lot of what was talked about connected to relationships.

I think the human connection cannot be underestimated in establishing and growing relationships at Langara. (I don't think this is news to anyone – but it is really hard to make it work even though it is valuable) It's hard – many of the faculty in my department work off campus teaching on-line courses. As a result of this, I tried to make sure our faculty meetings were of a lot of value to us as faculty and teachers face-to-face. I saved the info/updates part of the meeting for email to them -- and created space for us to talk about our teaching or where the Department was in our vision. At our faculty meetings we would go around the table and share one challenge and one delight from the term. It created really great common ground and ideas to follow up on for supporting faculty work. It also reminded me as the Chair – why I am here and what my job is.

On campus there are stars in every Department, and I tried to make an effort to touch base with people in person because I think there's value in that – and it helps to know them when you are talking on email or the phone. I would walk over the registrar's office and talk to someone about applications, credit transfers. I walked to the bookstore and talk to Lisa, stopped by other Chair/Coordinator office to say hi. I ran into Joe Rosen a lot walking in the hall (I mentioned him as life line for me- our random conversations in the halls had a lot of value). Our Division Chair, Jim Bowers created a practice of meeting every two weeks and it really worked to build that relationship and create consistency in what was going on in our Dept.

I read an interesting idea from an interview, it said “The only reasonable way to learn anything is to talk to someone. The best thing to do if you're an organizer or an agent is to talk to each other. Email is a terrible form of communication. If email were invented first, we'd all be ecstatic that we had this new invention called the telephone, so we could talk to each other and accomplish in 5 minutes over the phone something that would take us three weeks over email.” (Lavin) It's an interesting perspective and I think there might be something to this that can help us as Dept. Chairs. ☺

To wrap up – I really love teaching recreation at Langara College. It's an interesting and quirky place – but it's my place and I really care about how it works. My six years as Dept. Chair were challenging and frustrating but also exciting -- it grew me as a leader, and a teacher and I got to lead and support our Department as we became a learning organization together. As the Dept. Chair, I got to see a bigger picture of how the college works outside of my Department and I was heartened by the good people that stepped into Department Chair and Coordinator roles. When I looked around the room during the panel discussion on Thursday – I saw familiar faces - - some of the stars of Langara and I wanted to support you and let you know how much your leadership in your Dept. Chair/Coordinator role means to us as a College. Carry on ☺

References

Lavin, David. President and CEO, The Lavin Agency. An interview with David Lavin.
<http://www.thelavinagency.com/about>