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Things I Wish My Department Chair Would Say about Teaching

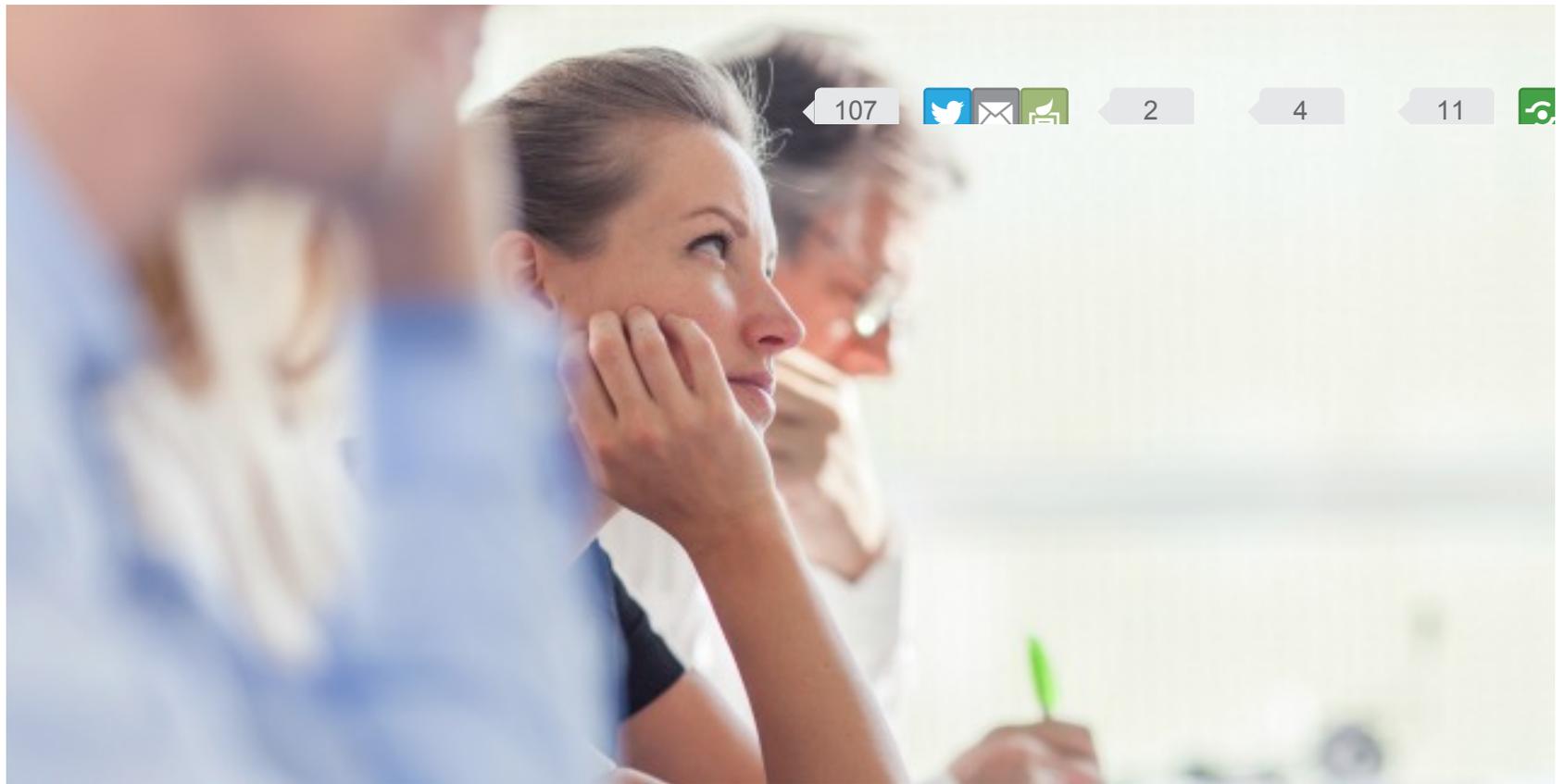
By: [Maryellen Weimer, PhD](#)



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I'm imagining that

this department head works at an institution where budgets are tight, everyone works hard at recruitment and retention, and teaching is an important part of the institution's mission. The wishes aren't in any particular order.



“We need to be having **more substantive conversations about teaching and learning in our department meetings**. We talk about course content, schedules, and what we're offering next semester but rarely about our teaching and its impact on student learning. What do you think about circulating a short article or article excerpt before some of our meetings and then spending 30 minutes talking about it? Could you recommend some readings?”

“I'm concerned about how we are **introducing new faculty to teaching**



in this department. Do we have them teaching the courses they should be teaching? Should our mentoring efforts be more formal? What if we didn't put student ratings from their first year in their dossier? I'm asking for recommendations and would love to hear your thoughts on the 'ideal' first-year teaching experience for our new faculty."

"I've been trying to **think more creatively about teaching awards**. The big university-wide awards are few and far between, and I question the processes used to select the winners. Some of the best teachers in the department consistently focus on student learning, but they do so with quiet, unassuming teaching styles that are not usually recognized. Then there's good work on big committee assignments like revising our curricula, always participating in those prospective student events, and advising above and beyond the call of duty. Shouldn't that work be recognized in a more public way? I'd like us to devise some sort of departmental award or recognition for all kinds of work that supports teaching and learning, and I need your help. Is a monetary award the only option?"

"I think we're doing **too much summative and not enough formative evaluation of teaching**. The research on student evaluations is clear. For midcareer faculty teaching the same courses, ratings do not vary all that much from one semester to the next (which says something about the power of summative assessments to improve instruction). I'd like to institute a semester-off policy. A tenured faculty member (one not up for promotion) will not be required to do the end-of-course ratings. In lieu of those, the faculty member will select and undertake a series of formative assessments. The person will not be expected to report results, only to document that the activities can be completed. Would there be support in the department for a policy like this?"

“I’m teaching a course this semester, and I’d welcome some feedback. I haven’t taught this course for a while and am trying some new approaches and different assignments. I’ve posted my syllabus on the course website and would appreciate your comments and suggestions. I was also wondering whether a couple of you who use in-class group work might be willing to come and observe when I try out some of the group activities I have planned.”

“Teaching well is hard work, and I don’t say thank you as often as I should. Many of you have been teaching here for some time now, and you continue to work hard on behalf of the students. Good teaching demands focus, emotional energy, and extraordinary time management skills. Teaching loads are not light in this department, and classes are larger than they used to be. You have reasons to complain, and you do, but you’re still there for students, and for that I am deeply grateful. Please join me for lunch on Friday. We’re providing a nice spread in the department office between noon and 2:00 p.m. I’d like to say thank you personally and hear more about your instructional concerns, challenges, and successes.”

“And, oh, one final thing: if you’d be willing to devote some time and energy to one or several of these areas, let’s talk. I could see you being **excused from all other departmental committee responsibilities** for the coming academic year in exchange for work on these projects.”

What would you add to the list? We do need to be realistic about what academic leaders at the departmental level can do, given the constraints under which most of them must currently operate. Theirs is not an easy job either.

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Al Beitz · 4 hours ago



Department Chairs are typically caught between determining what is best for the Dept and its faculty and dealing with administrative directives. If the department is heavily research based, then teaching can often be a second consideration unless the Chair values research and teaching as equal partners, which they should. As a former department chair who valued teaching, I did the following: 1. I established a weekly "conversations in teaching" in collaboration with the 2 other Dept Chairs in our college. This allowed all faculty and staff interested in learning innovative teaching techniques or in discussing educational issues to attend and participate in the discussions. 2. We established a solid peer review system that is primarily formative in nature. Faculty were trained in how to conduct a peer review and all faculty have to be peer reviewed every 1 to 3 years depending on their rank and whether they are tenure track, tenured or contract. 3. When we establish mentoring committees for new faculty (whether contract or tenure tract) at least one member of the committee is an outstanding teacher and helps the faculty member improve their teaching skills. 4. We have established a series of teaching awards at our college and one faculty member from each department is selected to receive a "teacher of the year" award; one course coordinator from each department receives an "Excellence in Course Coordination" award; and there are several others awards that are given out on "Education Day", when the entire college gets together to celebrate Education.

Reply ▼ **1 reply** · active 1 hour ago



annemarieke2013 Op · 1 hour ago



Hi Al,

It sounds like you were committed to quality teaching as a program chair. Just wondering if you'd be willing to write a blogpost for our [proflearning.com](#) blog about your experiences and best practices on how you did this. This blog is for program chairs and is all about fostering instructor learning.

Annemarieke Hoekstra

Northern Alberta Institute of Technology

Reply



Fred · 4 hours ago



Should not the true motive of being a professor be dealt with? I know at many universities that "teaching" is listed highly in amount of time involved for a position with remaining time disbursed among other key areas of duties. However, are we being true if we do not address the real priority of many institutions: publishing? Others put emphasis on grants. What duties and time expectations on paper are not likely the reality for many faculty. Just some thoughts.

Reply



Perry Shaw · 4 hours ago



A very sobering list Maryellen! I will be taking this to my Academic Team!
If I may suggest another: "I believe we and our students are focusing too much on grades and not enough on learning. Can we discuss some ways to de-emphasize grades and see learning as the goal?"

Reply



anjum wasim dar Op · 3 hours ago



An extremely thoughtful article .Teachers need guidance training and support in professional development.Students need training in 'behaviour modification' and good mannerism.

Reply



annemarieke2013 Op · 1 hour ago



There are not a lot of opportunities for professors and instructors to learn how to teach a specific course. The pedagogical content knowledge, (or andragogical content knowledge if you will) that good teachers need, involves ideas about students preconceived notions towards the subject, content students struggle with the most, explanations that work well for the majority of students, and activities that optimally support student learning of different parts of the content. Such knowledge is developed in practice, but can be greatly enhanced when professors/instructors who teach the same or similar courses

learn informally from and with each other, for instance in:

- course clusters,
- communities of practice,
- during discussions on teaching in department meetings,
- by creating course materials together,
- by observing each other teach
- by asking each other for advice
- by getting student feedback,
- by experimenting with new approaches and activities,
- by reading discipline specific education articles etcetera.

Typically these activities happen informally by good teachers. Program chairs, department heads and course coordinators can promote these activities by intentionally encouraging and acknowledging these activities as legitimate activities that are part of the professor/instructor role.

Annemarieke Hoekstra

Northern Alberta Institute of Technology

proflearning.com

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