

Righting the Rudderless Ship

Issue: The Department of Biochemistry and Molecular Biology at Oklahoma State University lacked a permanent department head for a period of seven years. The project involved three overarching goals that were intended to establish cohesiveness within the department, promote higher level activities in teaching and research, and to better align the department as an integral component of the university.

What has been done:

- Focused faculty meetings are held at regular intervals to communicate vision, report on the activities of critical working groups, acknowledge faculty accomplishments, and present future plans.
- Under-utilized space was equipped with new furniture as a faculty meeting room and an audio/visual communication system to allow faculty at off-campus locations to participate in meetings.
- Six faculty working groups were developed for critical departmental functions from eleven previously established committees. Secretarial support is provided for each faculty working group.
- The undergraduate curriculum was expanded to enrich the academic experience for more than 300 undergraduate majors. The graduate program was streamlined to include timely achievement of “milestone” activities that are monitored by annual student activity reports.
- A faculty mentoring program has been designed and will be initiated in the 2010 Fall semester.
- Social/professional interactions are regularly conducted, including receptions for special events and recognition of faculty, staff, and student achievements.
- Preparations for an external review included a comprehensive review of departments at five peer universities, a site visit at the University of Wisconsin, and a self-study document.
- A formal external review of the department was conducted consisting of a two-day site visit by three external reviewers. A written report by the review team was reviewed by the faculty and administration.
- Improving alumni relations is a priority for the department. Alumni recognition events, a departmental alumni association, and an annual alumni newsletter have been established.
- Increased participation in activities that focus on the strengths and contributions of the department to the college and university. Activities included news releases for significant faculty accomplishments to the public media.
- Recruited 5 adjunct faculty members to broaden multi-disciplinary expertise within the department.

Impacts:

- Faculty activities are more cohesive in all programmatic areas. Working groups are more effective in accomplishing important tasks that move the department forward.
- Strengthened the undergraduate and graduate programs. The revised undergraduate curriculum offers more academic opportunities to the students without increasing graduation requirements. Graduate students are earning appropriate degrees in a shorter period of time.
- The external review highlighted both successes and challenges facing the department. The written report serves as the basis for longer-term strategic planning.
- Improved alumni relations have led to increased financial support of the department.
- The department has a higher profile at the university level, yet recognition by the college remains a challenge.

Mentors: Dr. Molly Jahn, Dean, College of Agriculture and Life Sciences, University of Wisconsin and Dr. Thomas Brady, Dean, College of Life Sciences and Agriculture, University of New Hampshire.

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