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From: Barry R. Weingast  
Stanford University  

Re: Caltech Rules for Chairs

My notes on being department chair follow. They reflect my experience as being chair of the Stanford Department of Political Science from 1996-2001.

Some words of caution. The notes reflect a limited experience; and undoubtedly much of this advice could be improved (send me your thoughts and experiences!). Little should be taken as gospel. I first wrote these notes for my successor as chair years ago. Some of the specifics apply to Stanford or to political science, not other universities or fields. Finally, some of this will probably be obvious to you, and I hope you’ll bear with me in discussing the pedantic along with the more provocative. These notes are longer than I intended, but I enjoyed thinking about these issues.

I’m happy to discuss any of this if you wish, or if at some point while being chair you have an issue you want to air.

I hope you find them of some use. I look forward to hearing how it goes. I’d also be happy if you’d pass on lessons from your experience.

Best of luck,

Barry
In some ways, becoming department chair or dean is like being an assistant professor again. As a successful professor, you know all the ropes of the profession—writing a paper, giving a seminar, writing grants, working with colleagues on committees. But as a chair or dean, a whole new series of new questions and situations arise for which you being a successful professor has given you no experience. For example, as a chair how do you get the dean to make a better offer to someone you really want to hire? How do you prepare for and run a faculty meeting when controversial issues are to be discussed? And finally, what powers do department chairs or deans really have?

These rules do not provide a complete answer to any of these questions. Nor are they a “how-to guide.” But they provide a way of thinking about the job of chair as well as many rules of thumb about these questions and many others.

(1) The power of the chair: A chair’s powers are fewer than you think!

(A) If you think you have power as chair and that people should listen to you by virtue of your being chair, you’re under a big illusion. If you need this type of relationship with your faculty (qua followers), resign now! This will never happen.

(B) Calvert’s rule: After five years of being chair at Rochester, Randy Calvert told me that perhaps the only real power of the chair is that “you are the only one who talks to everyone.” As you’ll see, many people come to faculty meetings but don’t speak their mind because they fear being alone in their opinions. By talking to everyone (in this case, prior to a faculty meeting), you learn about the faculty’s “public opinion” and know more about it than any one else.

This can be an advantage in several settings. For example, if there’s an idea you want to succeed, you can encourage it by saying, “others feel this way too. If you speak on this, I know others will too.” Of course, for this to be true, others must feel similarly and

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1I call these Caltech Rules because I learned how to think this way about organizations while a graduate student at Caltech from the remarkable group of (then) young professors: Bob Bates, John Ferejohn, Mo Fiorina, Charlie Plott, and especially Roger Noll. Randy Calvert, another Caltech Ph.D., helped me in my thinking of these matters.
be willing to speak! I have seen this strategy make the difference in several instances. Moreover, consulting means that you learn about good ideas that would not otherwise see the light of day.

(C) One aspect of managing the faculty is to think in political terms: you need to build and maintain a coalition of support. You cannot succeed alone, you must have a big group of supporters. Start with the people you most respect in the department. Build a consensus about how your faculty positions should be allocated. Clearly, this involves tailoring what you seek to do to the interests of your coalition. Put another way, there is a close correspondence between what you choose as your objectives and who will support you. Build these together.

(2) What you do (implications of Calvert’s rule)

(A) As Paul Drake (former chair and dean of social sciences at UCSD) told me on becoming chair: “consult, consult, consult; don’t go to the bathroom without consulting.” See everyone about all major decisions. Know what they want and what they’ll say in meetings and whether or not they’ll support you.

(B) As chair, you must think of yourself as the agent of the department, and you must be a faithful representative. Again, departmental policy is not about your preferences, but about those of the department.

A useful rule of thumb for conversations with colleagues is to begin conversations by soliciting their opinion. I found that if I started off with my opinion, I got an argument: People don’t treat the chair’s opinion as just another faculty member’s opinion, but as policy. (Indeed, in this sense, the chair should have few opinions; as an agent, she should have those of her coalition.) So colleagues react differently if they disagree with a chair than they would to a colleague.

Instead I usually began by soliciting a colleague’s opinion on an issue: “What do you think we should do on this issue?” Sometimes I’ll solicit opinions on options they don’t mention, such as, “I’ve heard others speak about hiring X, what do you think?” This is often the way I introduced what I wanted to happen to those I suspect might oppose or those whose opinions I did not know.

(C) A word of advice about faculty meetings. On key personnel and major policy issues, I strongly urge you not to go into the meeting without knowing what will happen. If you fail this condition, cancel the meeting. Failure can have several consequences. First, a big mistake can color your entire tenure. As we’ve learned the hard way from experience, fights are damaging, and their effects are hard to undo. Second, you do not want to show that you can be beaten.

(D) Another important power of the chair concerns appointing committees. This is one
of the main ways you influence who is hired or how major departmental policies are made. Think the committees through, and appoint them all at once. The reason is the “inevitable logic of musical chairs” (as Schelling reminds us). If you assign person A to committee X, it will be hard to ask her to serve on committee Y. It is therefore useful to think through all your major committees and key departmental administrative posts (director of graduate studies, chair of admissions) for the year at one time.

Lucius Barker, my predecessor as chair, began a tradition in our department of field balance on committees. Instead of appointment committee members only from the field in which we were searching, appointment members from that field balanced by members from other fields. This can be very important, both for building support outside of a field for an initiative, but also to give you flexibility in a field that is particularly weak. Consider a weak field, one whose judgement you don’t trust. If you appoint a committee composed of members only from this field, you’re in trouble. With field balance, you can appoint prominent outsiders whose judgement you trust. This rule of thumb is not for every department, but it is useful to consider.

Another question to ask about committees: should you appoint obvious opponents of what you want to have happen? The upside is that they get their say in the committee and are less likely to fight at the next stage. Or do you leave them off the committee and risk a fight at a faculty meeting?

(E) Whiners. Another Paul Drake wisdom: if you have a serious group of whiners, create a whiners’ committee, ask them to spend the year writing a report to the faculty. This takes the blame off you. Typically, the whiners want to whine, not work.

(3) Arguing for more faculty resources with the Dean

Emphasize public goods and the larger benefits to the university community. For example: We have one paramount goal – to be the number 1 department in the country. We have a plan – here’s how. Every time you meet with the dean, keep your eye on the big picture: explain how this particular move (including new resources from them) fits with the larger goal. If you cannot do that for a particular wish, perhaps you shouldn’t be asking for it.

Try adding curricular rationales to your initiatives (for new positions, for requests for new funds). The administration always likes rationales that extend beyond faculty hires to include the undergraduate curriculum. Think about revising the curriculum so it is more logical – and so that the new curriculum emphasizes what you are missing in terms of faculty you need to hire to teach the gaps in your new and wonderful curriculum. That is, use curriculum to help build support as to what type of faculty you need. I have some ideas about how this might work, and we should discuss.

Also, remember that deans are very busy. Make your communications concise and to
the point. Perhaps this is obvious, but avoid lecturing them! You want to have a relationship of close friends, where both sides can lay out their concerns honestly.

Think about trying to add new “scientific” component for which there may be specific pockets of additional resources. E.g., add a new component for data analysis for undergrads, including a new data lab and new faculty.

Usually deans have additional resources for hiring women and minorities, so look for talented people here.

(4) Animosity among the faculty

Deans and provosts are far less likely to give money to department’s that fighting (e.g., because fighting departments are more likely to squander resources) Hence:

(A) In general you should stand above both old and new fights.

(B) Work to establish and maintain norms of collegiality: there are certain things we don’t do to one another. Everybody is to be treated with dignity; all approaches within political science are worthy. Everyone has a place in the Department.

You must not tolerate faculty treating each other badly in faculty meetings, even if this has been done for years. Establish a new norm: “We don’t do tolerate this type of behavior toward one another here.” Of course, you have to make sure everyone knows in advance that: (i) you won’t tolerate bad behavior; and (ii) further, what you’ll do if someone steps out of line.

One way I prepared for possible problems in faculty meetings was to use our department’s main policy and planning committee (P&P) by lining up the ducks in advance. That is, arrange in advance with P&P that, if someone steps out of line in a faculty meeting, you will announce that they are out of line and then you will call on the members of P&P so that they can give rehearsed short speeches: “we cannot tolerate this here.” If you say this clearly and then so to do three others, no one will defend the right to be disrespectful.

Most universities have rules against treating others with disrespect and hostilities. If this is an on-going problem, solicit the dean’s help. It shouldn’t continue.

(C) Create the idea that everything is different now.

(D) The goal is create a supportive environment, where everyone’s work is better by virtue of being here.

(E) There are settings, however, where it may be wise to favor one faction over another;
for example, if you wish to take the department or school in a particular direction that involves favoring or relying one group over the other. The danger, as I’ve suggested, is that you may become mired in coalitional battles and get little done.

A critical precondition for this strategy is that, as chair, you have the dean’s support in this and that the dean understands and supports the political and policy implications of your choice. The same holds for a dean with respect to the provost’s support.

(5) Use the administration as levers within the Department

(A) The administration has promised you resources, but no promise in a university is a contract enforceable in the courts. Converting the promises into reality requires that you show you are worth the dean’s or provost’s effort to make good on the promise. Hence the first few appointments have to be the best possible ones you can make. You need to impress the deans that you are worth her scarce resources; that is, worth giving you additional positions instead of giving them to one of the many other worthy departments who promise great hires. The administration wants to be known as being a success and you can help it by becoming a bright spot that the dean or provost can tout as one of her successes. This means spot-light appointments that can be advertised around the community.

(B) This also means using the administration in the Department: “In order to make good on the administration’s promise, we must hire only the best. We cannot afford to hire someone who fails to meet this standard.” The letters, for example, must be the best; for if they are not, it will be hard to convince the dean that you’ve done your best.

One minimal condition on hires is that every new hire must obviously raise the average. But as I’ve suggested, the first few must be better than that: they have to be among the best in your department. This attitude will help you defend against people who want to bring in their buddies who are not good enough.

(C) A similar logic holds for major policy decisions about the direction of the department or school.

(6) Recruiting

(A) Every department pushes the dean to make the best offers. By developing a relationship where the deans trust you, you can help guide decisions about particular market values. Knowing market values is therefore a critical part of your business. Ask your friends, former chairs, and chairs of other departments around the country – what are they paying for your top scholars (senior)? what for new junior hires? etc.
Of course, this must be done discretely. When Berkeley was trying to keep one of their formal modelers a number of years ago (before I became chair), a brand-new chair called me and explained their situation. He then said he had an embarrassing question he needed to ask me – what was my salary? I told him I wouldn’t answer that question, but I would answer another question: “If Stanford were to try to hire a top formal modeler, what would we have to pay?” You get the idea: how you ask the question matters!

(B) Look for extra resources: spend time learning the institutes and programs (at Stanford, these include Hoover, FSI, but also various programs, such as public policy, Latin American Studies, etc.) that can provide extra goodies and add ons, such as summer months, research funds, funds to run seminars, hire RA’s, etc. Don’t depend solely on the dean for these extras. Or put another way, get as much as you can from the deans, but also get additional resources from elsewhere. This proved critical to several of my senior hires. Given the problems with housing here, summer months have been critical for many.

(C) What most recruiters miss is the “vision”: part of convincing someone to come is to convince them that their work will be better if they move here. This requires more than just stating this premise. You must also know their work and (credibly!) explain how their work will benefit from being here. Of course, you’ll have a lot of help here, since many others in the department or school will give this line. But as chair or dean, you are the principal recruiter and you need to think about your tact for each hire. I almost always discuss their work with them as a colleague: what I like, but also directions for improvement (think of John Ferejohn as the role model here!). These kinds of comments provide substance to your claim that the recruit’s work will be better if they come here.

(D) Another critical, though very different aspect of recruiting. When you are recruiting someone, you will invariably see some of their personal foibles. This happens almost every time. Some candidates are anxious about a surprising array of factors. Sometimes they’ll seem irrational about some details. Part of the reason is that they are rationally nervous about a big move and, at the same time, are quite uncertain about how it will work. For example, will moving here really be better for me? will my spouse like it? or will my kids survive leaving their friends and adjust to the new schools? Quite often it is hard for candidates to talk directly about these anxieties, so they talk instead about something else. I had one scholar demand a dedicated parking space. This is never done at Stanford, though was at his urban university. I spent a lot of time talking with him about this. Of course, he wasn’t really worried about parking space.

My philosophy has always been go with the flow; be very tolerant of foibles.

(7) The Central Fisc
The central fisc has a natural distrust of all department’s and programs. Don’t begrudge them this attitude – it is rational! Every department chair argues that their prospective candidate is the best for a new position or for tenure, and it cannot all be true. The same logic holds for major initiatives that require support of the administration.

You must develop multiple strategies for dealing with the central fisc’s natural distrust.

(A) Build confidence with the dean or provost that you can bring in quality candidates, as I’ve mentioned. But it also means being honest with the dean about who is not quality. It is also essential that the Department develop a reputation that it says “no” in hard tenure cases rather than forwarding bad files to the administration so that they have to do the dirty work of denying tenure. Deans hate department’s that regularly force them to be the bad guy on tenure. More importantly, forcing the administration to do this dirty work tarnishes your reputation, which in turn will make it much harder for the administration to favor you when you forward a mixed file that, for good reasons, you want to favor. Put simply you need the administration on your side for these difficult cases.

(B) Verification. Seek outside signals for the dean that your claims are true. This is part of the reason that letters are so central to the appointment process. So too are the major awards and accolades of our profession. Another source of verification is on campus. “This particular candidate is great, as evidence, Institute X is willing to provide additional resources toward bringing her here.”

(C) Coordinate with your cognate chairs in poli sci, soc, psych, history, etc. You are resources for one another, and you all have a collective interest in strengthening social science. (Science departments tend to be much better than either social science or humanities departments in coordinating their efforts.) You can help with one another’s recruiting. I have several times offered to call or email prospective faculty that other departments are trying to attract; they can reciprocate. This always helps the externalities argument: your work will be better if you come here because a great many people will take an interest in what you do.

(8) Preparing appointment files

As you know, one of the most intense part of the chair’s or dean’s job is producing the files that justify our appointments and promotions to the administration. These are always more complex and harder to do than you think. I recall that the text part of the file in a tenure case at the end of my time as chair was 25 single spaced pages. This included the chair’s cover letter; a discussion of the work; a discussion of the letters; an evaluation of the work and letters; and a report on the faculty discussion. The committee writes part of this, but I wrote well more than half. Very few of our colleagues can write these portions in ways that are convincing to the deans, and the various advisory boards – for example, at Stanford, A&P and the Ad Board.
Start early on your appointment files. Seek the advice of former chairs and, possibly, people in the Dean’s office who can give you advice about how to prepare these files. If it is not now standard practice to send the deans an early draft for comments, consider asking the deans if they will give you the courtesy that, because you’re new, to look at a draft of the file so that they can read and criticize it. In the beginning, make sure your associate dean reads it and gives you serious comments.

Several of my early appointment files had some problems because I had no clue what was required. Here are some rules of thumb about successful files.

Claims of greatness are never sufficient – every chair does this (and, as I’ve emphasized, such claims cannot always be true). Deans and review committees rationally discount these claim and superlatives.

This implies that you must demonstrate why the claim of greatness applies:

(A) Explain the work and how it fits into the literature; here’s why the scholar raises an important problem; here is the main finding; here is how this changed the literature and how everyone thereafter had to take this into account, etc.

(B) Here is what the outside reviewers said. Every chair emphasizes the positive parts of the letters. But we all know, outside letters are written in code. For example, when a letter writer praises the work for several paragraphs but then ranks the candidate number four in a list of five.

My advice is: don’t ignore the negatives. Instead, note the reservations expressed in the letters. Then explain why the department found them unpersuasive. This is often one of the most important parts of the file, so don’t scrimp. The deans and the review committees will all see the negatives, and if you ignore them, they will wonder what’s going on. This doubt works against the file’s success. Moreover, even if this doesn’t jeopardize the file, the more outstanding the candidate seems to the deans (and they go in large part by the file), the more they’ll do in the offer.

(C) And all the file must be written for a general audience of biologists, economists, English professors, and mathematicians. It’s easy to say that you must get rid of jargon, but this is hard to do in practice, and you must work at it.

(D) Many departments produce appointment files that read like lawyer’s briefs, meaning, that they provide the best possible interpretation of the work and the letters. The central fisc has reason to be nervous about such briefs: Nearly all appointments have warts, and if your files usually argue that this appointment walks on water, you will lose credibility.

This observation has an implication. If there are negatives in the file, address them. Here is a weakness (e.g., in the work, in the letters), and here’s why the faculty did not
find them persuasive.

I used the section on the faculty discussion to air problems with the appointment and to give the best reasons why the majority didn’t find them persuasive.

I can also report from my experience on the Advisory Board that the most persuasive letters from the deans on seemingly marginal cases are those that spend more time on the negatives than the positives. These files explain why, despite the obvious negatives, the faculty still came down on the positive side. For example, some appointments represent a change in direction for a department, one that is bold and intellectually exciting, but also risky. In this setting, the letters are often mixed; some letter-writers will defend the existing ideas emphasize only the risks and downside of the new approach. So airing the risk and explaining why you – and the faculty – feel it is justified will help your cause. This explains why some of the letters are mixed or negative. And, as I said above, the bigger and risky the new initiative, the more useful it is to have the support of your dean (or, for a dean, of the provost) for the new direction.

(E) The best appointments are the easiest, and some departments have a tendency to be sloppy on them. Don’t. You want to develop a reputation for your files, and you want a reputation for doing a top job so that when there are appointments that require judgement, the deans side with you instead on the side of suspicion and doubt.

(9) Issues with Individual Faculty Members

Your faculty will come to you with an endless variety of issues of deep concern to them. Many of these will be surprising, and many will seem trivial (can someone really care about that? – evidently!).

(A) When Tom Romer became chair at Princeton in the early 1990s, I asked him what it was like. He said that the modal conversation with his colleagues goes like this. A colleague comes into the office and says, “I have something of incredible importance to ask (but I’m a bit nervous to raise it). Why is my trash can the smallest trash can in the department?” I laughed and laughed when I first heard this. Get that laugh over with now: I’ve had this conversation dozens of times – and you cannot laugh in the presence of this obviously heart-felt faculty member. I asked Tom how he answered this, and he said, “I don’t know.” Of course, he has the phlegmatic personality to do that, which I could not.

(B) Over 50% of faculty concerns (including legitimate ones) can be dealt with just by being a sympathetic listener. “You’re right, it is a big problem, let me look into it.” (Often you say this knowing that the rules do not permit it.) Sometimes I’ll say, “I’m sorry that the rules don’t permit us to fix this” or, “I agree with you that you’re deserving. I’ll make the case with the deans, though I should say in advance that on the basis of my experience the deans are unlikely to grant exceptions of this type...”
Recall also how deans and many university bureaucrats think. Faculty member A comes to you and makes a case about how deserving they are and thus they need X; or that rule Y should be broken in their case. You then bring this request to the dean. Deans will often approach this by saying: ignore the particulars of this case. If we grant this request, what precedent are we setting; what class of people are affected; and do we want to set a precedent that all people like this can now get this benefit? Usually the answer is no, regardless of how deserving this particular case is. This natural reaction from the administration will seem bureaucratic and, sometimes, arbitrary.

But notice: the logic of the system helps takes the blame away from you and puts it on the deans or the bureaucracy. This is an important principle: do not be the fall guy, but make the deans so. Moreover I’ve often expressed the above bureaucratic logic to our colleagues: it helps explain to them how the system works and, also, why they shouldn’t expect too much. I have found it useful to tell faculty in advance about this logic so that they see that Dean’s are not faculty and approach these issues from a different perspective. Of course, you must then go talk to the deans with the request. Sometimes miracles do happen.

This logic has a further implication. Because deans think this way, you can sometimes take advantage of this by arguing that this case is different or unique so that it doesn’t set a precedent for 100 others. If you can give a plausible rationale for doing X here in a way that the deans will not set a precedent for doing X for a group of faculty, they are more likely to say yes.

(C) You must be able to keep your colleague’s concerns secret. You stand to lose considerable stature and respect if it ever gets out that you’ve violated a confidence.

And learn what “secret” means. Many faculty members treat “confidential” information as meaning that they can tell only one other person. Whatever your behavior as a faculty member – and we all like to gossip and seem privy to inside information – you cannot do this as chair. Secrets are secrets.

Your friends will ask you about things, such as salaries. Don’t disclose this information! You’ll create all kinds of problems for yourself if let out this information. It will get back to the deans (and what other source but you), and this will hurt your reputation.

(D) Never forget that a great many faculty are self-centered prima-donas! Putting up with these types is part of the job. And of course, along with this comes a range of other standard foibles, such as faculty who can see everyone else’s faults but their own. My favorite is that particular faculty often have no idea about the role they play in their own problems. Many of these people will never know (which implies that, if you try to tell them, you will not only fail, but most likely will insult them).

(E) An aspect of being chair is that you may find yourself negotiating for salaries and goodies for others that you may not have yourself. Get over any feelings of jealousy
and do what’s best for the department – increasing the probability that the recruit will say yes.

(10) Junior faculty

Everyone emphasizes mentoring, though this is hard because it means that senior faculty must spend time doing this. Spend time with them and assess their special concerns. Sometimes small things can help. I established a “take a senior colleague to lunch” program, whereby I told the jr fac that I would pay for a small number of lunches each year if they wanted to invite senior colleagues to lunch. Urging senior colleagues to read jr colleagues papers and take them to lunch is an obvious strategy.

You can do many things to make their lives better. As we’ve discussed, one is providing funds for their research accounts. This allows them to attend additional conventions, buy books and data, etc.

Think also about putting them on hiring committees. This is important for socialization.

(11) Conflicts with individuals faculty members.

In the modern legal and PC environment, you have to remember that perceptions matter. Thus, you may feel you’re treated someone ok, but if they do not think so, this can be a source of trouble.

A special word about email. Emails have a similar legal status as correspondence by postal mail in the sense that they can become public. Moreover, every universities (and major organization) keeps permanent records of every email, and these are property of the university, potentially dredged up in a suit. Email is therefore part of the public record.

The main implication is that, by definition, there is no such thing as a secret, private, or confidential, email. No email is “off the record,” no matter if you say so, or if a colleague solicits such. Anything in writing is a permanent and public part of your record.

Moreover, it turns out that, after the fact, every sentence can be read in isolation. This implies that you must measure what you say. Never send an email when you’re angry or have just had an emotional, confrontational, or difficult meeting with another faculty member (or staff). For your most important emails, I recommend that you write a draft in your word processor, save it, and revise it later, especially on an issue that makes you angry or anxious. This was my standard practice for all messages of importance to faculty. Write drafts on your computer; reread and revise them; and only when they say what you want, copy and paste into an email.
If you have an on-going conflict with a faculty member, do not act or write unilaterally. Consult your dean and university counsel as to the steps you should take to resolve the problem. Indeed, for all meetings with individual faculty that I thought might cause problems, I went to see the university counsel prior to the meeting and to read drafts of every memo and email I sent.

Finally, remember that you are an officer of the university. This means that there is no such thing as an “off the record” conversation. No matter how you preface your remarks, everything you say is on the record. The implication is that, every time you deal with a personnel issue (renewal, promotion), make sure what that everything you say can be made public with out embarrassing you.

(12) Liability

Sad to say, liability is a part of the everyday world of the university. I found a surprising number of questions had answers that began with concerns for liability. This matters for all personnel issues, whether faculty, staff, or student. You'll learn more about this than you care to know, so be prepared.

(13) Misc

(A) Most universities have small pockets of money for unusual things. E.g., curriculum development; faculty reading groups; special lectures; special visitors; bringing technology into the classroom (e.g., laptops; or survey research; data analysis; or experiments). Look for these and exploit them!

(B) Bureaucrats: they run the university. Many have no understanding of or commitment to the basic mission of the university. A particular variant of this is the bureaucrat who thinks the only important aspect of the university is the portion they oversee (such as classroom assignment). Bureaucrats make lots of decisions which conflict with basic features of the teaching and research function, often because they do not understand either how the university works or the full implications of their decisions. As a consequence, they can be very irritating. Do not get mad at them! Instead, use reason. And go to the deans. Except for problems of space, logic and the deans often solve these problems.