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Center for
**Faculty Development
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SPARK

Supporting Program Advisors through Reflective Knowledge-sharing

IGNITE POTENTIAL + EMPOWER SUCCESS

The Role of Program Chair and the
Graduate Program Head



September 2026

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Associate Vice Provost for Faculty Affairs

In the chat...

Please list:

Your title

Your academic discipline

College/Campus



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Leadership Development at Penn State

Developing Leaders

- **SPARK**
- Penn State Emerging Academic Leaders (PSEAL)
- Provost Endorsement Program (foundational skills)
- Big Ten Academic Alliance Academic Leadership Program (ALP)

New and Experienced Leaders

- Academic Unit Head Series
- New Administrators Workshop
- Academic Leadership Forums
- Excellence in Academic Leadership Program

Experienced Leaders

- Deans Master Class
- Big Ten Academic Alliance Programs (DEO, DLP)
- Faculty Affairs Residency and Administrative Fellows



Agenda

- The role of the program chair, professor-in-charge, disciplinary coordinator (and many more names)
- The role of the graduate program head



Role of the Program Chair at Penn State

Leading with Distributed Authority:
Role – Responsibilities - Dilemmas - Practical Tools

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Associate Vice Provost for Faculty Affairs

Professor of Music Education



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Role of the Program Chair

Program chairs are **faculty academic leaders** who create coherence among curriculum, faculty work, student needs, disciplinary priorities, and institutional expectations.

One role, many titles

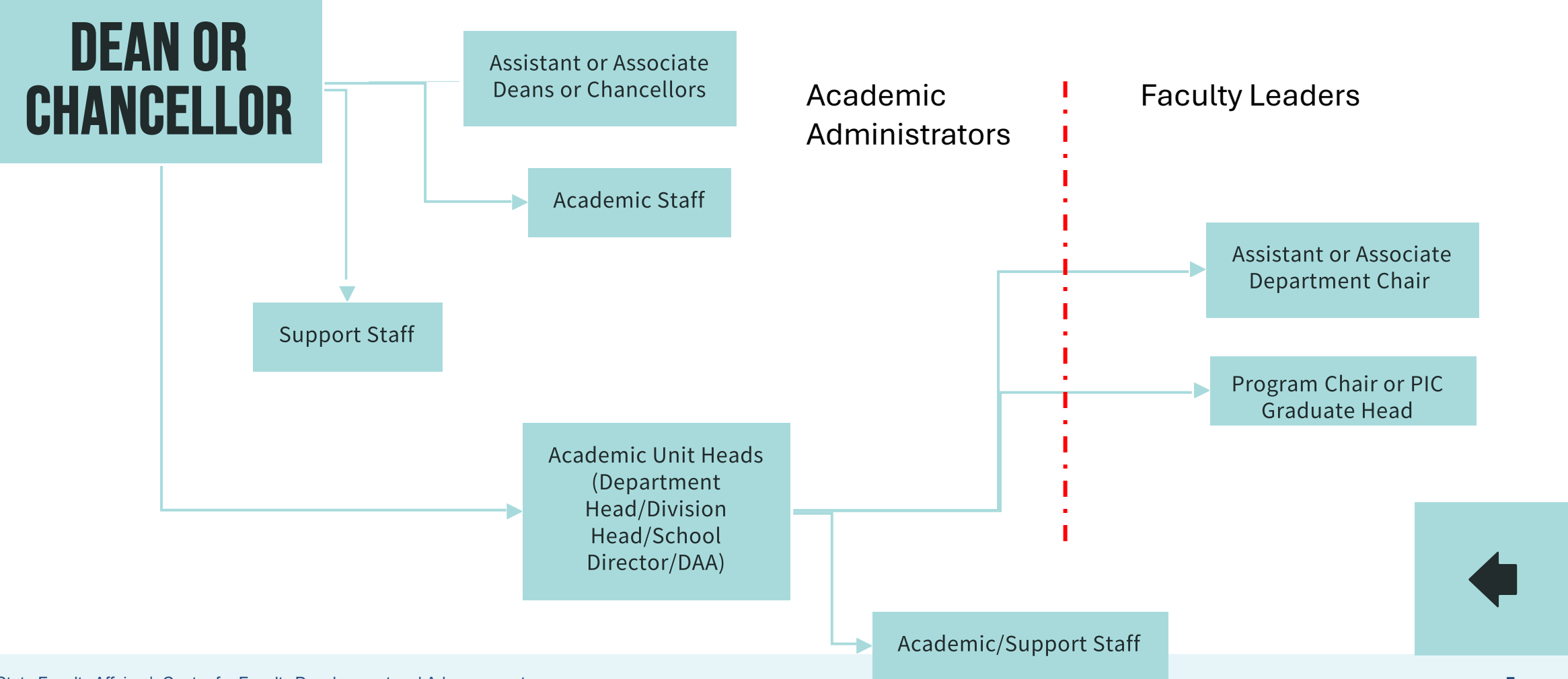
- Program Chair
- Professor-in-Charge
- Program Director
- Program Coordinator
- Disciplinary Coordinator
- Degree Coordinator
- Academic Program Director
- Director of Undergraduate Studies

Penn State context

275 Majors • 200 Minors • 100 undergraduate certificates • 20 two-year associate degrees • 250+ departments

Where the Program Chair Sits

The program chair is a faculty leader who connects academic administrators, faculty, staff, and students.



Common Responsibilities

The role varies by unit, but these are common areas program chairs may oversee.

Area	Typical focus
1 Academic and disciplinary leadership	Represent the discipline; maintain academic integrity, currency, and priorities
2 Curriculum and program design	Review curriculum; revise requirements; ensure course sequencing and program coherence
3 Program quality and assessment	Monitor learning outcomes; coordinate assessment, program review, and accreditation
4 Faculty coordination and development	Coordinate course offerings; identify teaching needs; support, mentor, and develop faculty
5 Student support and development	Advising, referrals, student concerns, progress monitoring, career and professional development
6 Recruitment, admissions, and enrollment	Outreach, recruitment, admissions, yield, enrollment planning, and retention
7 Program operations and administration	Scheduling, catalogs, records, reports, policies, deadlines, and coordination with staff
8 Communication and advocacy	Connect faculty, students, staff, department, and college; advocate for program needs and resources
9 Program development and continuity	Innovation, partnerships, strategic planning, shared ownership, and transition planning

The Dilemma

Responsibility is clear. Authority is distributed.

Program chairs may be responsible for...	But may not control...
Curriculum coherence	Every course or faculty decision
Student experience	All advising or student-support resources
Faculty coordination	Faculty workload or assignments
Program quality	All resources needed for improvement/innovation
Recruitment and visibility	Enrollment decisions or marketing support
Program development	Budget, staffing, or formal approvals

This requires leadership through influence, judgment, relationships, communication, and advocacy.

Common Pitfalls

Most pitfalls begin when responsibility is mistaken for authority—or when authority is avoided altogether.

Overinflating the role

**Acting when the matter
should be elevated**

Elevating everything

**Failing to clarify
expectations**

**Documenting too much or
too little**

**Confusing consultation with
consensus**

**Leading through
disciplinary authority alone**

**Becoming the program
bottleneck**

**Promising what the chair
cannot provide**

**Neglecting upward
communication**

**Allowing invisible labor to
expand indefinitely**

Failing to create continuity

Practical tips for leading with distributed authority

The role is real. The authority is often shared.

Clarify the lane

- Name the ask:
information, consultation, or a decision?
- Check the policy, precedent, and who owns the final call.
- Be clear about what you can coordinate and what you cannot promise: funding, workload, staffing, or personnel decisions.
- When in doubt - ELEVATE

Document with judgment

- Document decisions, commitments, owners, and next steps, but not every conversation.
- For consequential matters, preserve basic facts, impact, actions taken, consultation, and applicable policy.
- Record patterns and program impact, not personalities or motives. If it is egregious or you are unsure, elevate.

Build influence

- Pre-wire people who will be affected; avoid surprises for your head or chair.
- Bring a short summary, options, and a specific request, not just a problem.
- Close the loop with the decision, owner, and timeline. Build partners and backups so you are not the sole point of failure.
- Create continuity: share calendars, decision records, contacts, and handoffs so the program does not depend on one person.

WHEN IN DOUBT

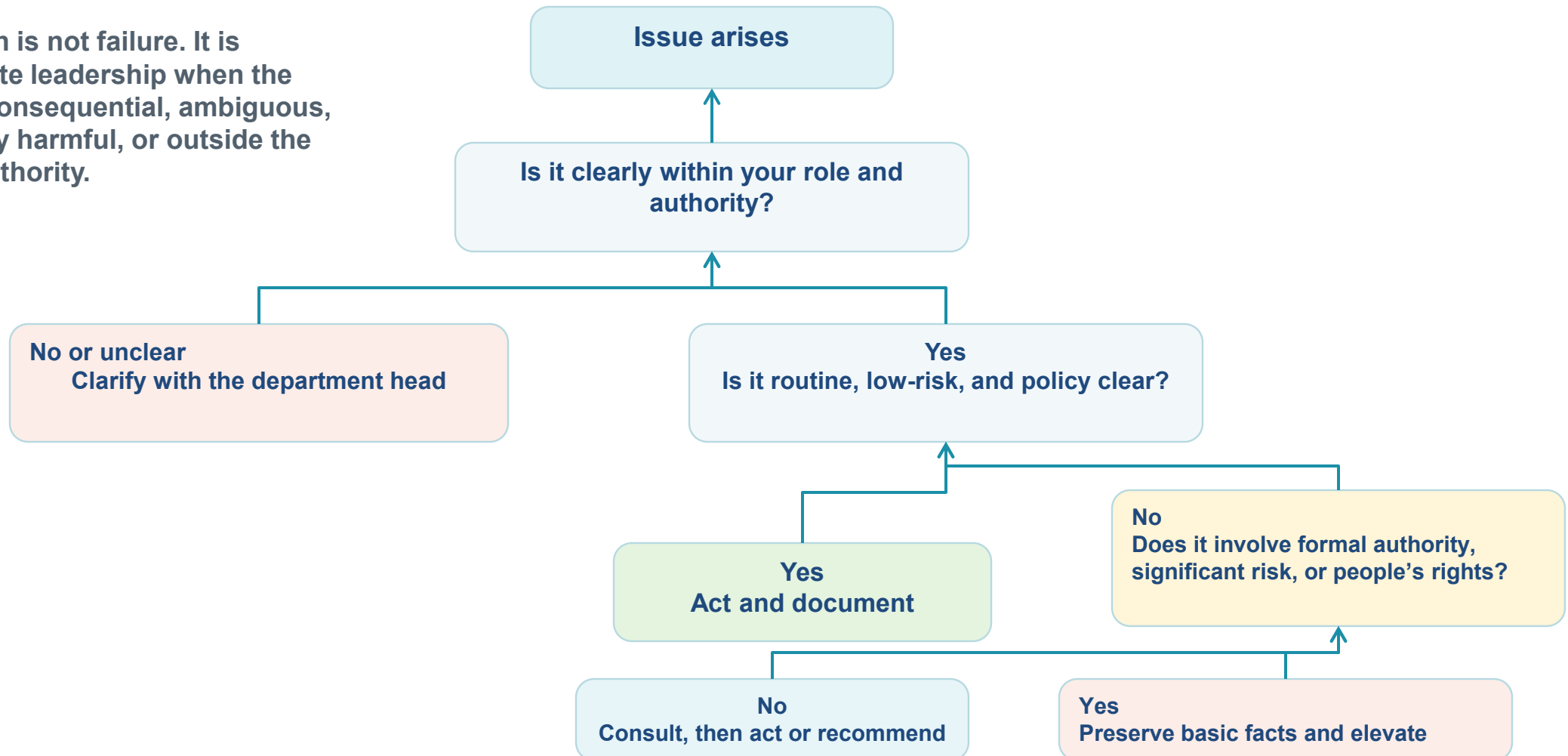
Clarify → Consult → Act within your lane → Elevate what is consequential, ambiguous, or outside your authority.

Useful language: "I can coordinate..." "I recommend..." "I need your decision..." "I am flagging this because..."

Making Decisions

Use the questions below to decide when to act, consult, recommend, or elevate.

Escalation is not failure. It is appropriate leadership when the issue is consequential, ambiguous, potentially harmful, or outside the chair's authority.



Helpful statements...

Use the questions below to decide when to act, consult, recommend, or elevate.

Communicating up

- I can coordinate...
- I can gather the relevant information...
- I recommend...
- I am consulting you because...
- I need your decision about...
- I want to clarify who owns this decision.
- I am flagging this because it may involve a policy, personnel, safety, or student-rights concern.
- Here are the facts, the program impact, and the decision we need.

Communicating sideways

- I can bring this request forward, but I cannot guarantee the outcome...
- I can advocate for...
- I want to understand...
- I am gathering perspectives ...
- I am asking for your expertise...
- I invite you to oversee...
- What are the facts...?
- I will close the loop by...

Applying the Model: A Student Concern

The chair can move the issue forward without owning every decision

CASE

Students cannot enroll in a required course because there is no instructor is available to teach it. The chair is responsible for student progress but does not control workload, staffing, or funding.

Clarify the lane

Confirm who owns the staffing decision. Check the policy, precedent, and any authority delegated to the chair.

Consult and recommend

Talk with affected faculty, staff, the scheduler, and the department head. Bring the student and program impact, options, and a preferred path.

Influence, elevate, document

Build support for the preferred option. Elevate workload, staffing, funding, or student-rights issues. Record the facts, decision, owner, and timeline.

AVOID

- Promising a new section, funding, or workload relief
- Pressuring a faculty member to accept an assignment
- Creating an unofficial exception
- Treating consultation as consensus
- Waiting until students are delayed to communicate upward
- Becoming the program's bottleneck

Responsibility is clear. Authority is distributed.

Upcoming Sessions

Join us for our next session:

Running Effective Meetings: Facilitation, Participation, Decision-Making

Monday, October 19, 2026, from 1 to 2 p.m.

Registration and session information

|

<https://cfda.psu.edu/leadership/spark>

Presented by:

Dr. Steven Huddart, Smeal Chair Professor of Accounting and Senior Associate Dean for Research and Faculty

Dr. Greg Filbeck, CFA, FRM, CAIA, FDP, PRM, Vice Chancellor and Associate Dean of Academic Affairs, and Samuel P. Black III Professor of Finance and Risk Management, Penn State Erie, the Behrend College

Dr. Ann Clements, Associate Vice Provost for Faculty Affairs and Director of the Center for Faculty Development and Advancement



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Questions and discussion

Thank you!

A physical location for faculty to meet and collaborate is coming to the 4th floor Old Main in 2026.



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Contact us at facultyaffairs@psu.edu.

Visit cfda.psu.edu
to learn more.

