

Hey Jane!

Dealing with a Difficult Chair

Welcome to Column 34 of *Hey Jane!* This is a project of the SWS Career Development Committee. Questions are generated by the committee and SWS members.

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Hey Jane! I am having trouble dealing with the chair of my department. In my interactions with him, he is often hostile, abrasive, or disrespectful. It has gotten so bad that I find it difficult to discuss with him my department's and university's expectations of me, or to ask for resources to help me succeed. I am at the point now where I dread any interactions with him, including attending department meetings. Since I do not have tenure, I am worried about speaking out. Help!

Not many departments are free from conflict, but there are few things as stressful as conflict rooted in a department chair, head, or center/program director. It can be incredibly hard to deal with a difficult administrator, as their poor behavior can become part of the unit's culture if allowed to continue. Moreover, the power that administrators have to evaluate faculty make challenging their behavior difficult—especially for junior faculty and even more so for junior faculty who are marginalized by gender, race, sexuality, or some other form of social inequality. However, there are some direct and indirect actions you can take to improve your individual circumstances, if not the systemic problem.

1. Identify allies. You are probably not the only person who finds this chair intolerable and finding trusted allies is one of the most important steps you can take. Especially good allies are people with institutional authority that can either challenge your chair or protect you from retribution or poor evaluations. Once you have identified allies, let those with more institutional experience, influence, or job security take the lead in promoting institutional change.
2. Strategically engage outside of your department when possible. Some schools encourage interdisciplinary work, and this can provide you with a chance to work more closely with faculty outside of your current toxic environment. It can also help you develop a good reputation across your university. This can be protective for you if that good reputation is with a dean, provost, or another individual with considerable institutional clout.
3. Document, document, document. Although obvious for experiences that constitute harassment and discrimination, this can also be important to support your competence in case your chair is someone who tries to make others appear to be at fault for their mistakes. Accumulate as much information as you can in case of retaliation, so that you

can provide evidence of misbehavior or any situation in which the chair has abused their authority. Your chair's superiors often need this information if they are to act to improve the situation.

4. Don't give your chair space in your head or soul. It's tempting to get together with colleagues and kvetch, but that is an expenditure of your emotional and cognitive energy on a person that doesn't deserve it! Instead, spend time at work working and doing things that you find energizing and intellectually stimulating. Outside of work, leave the negative stuff behind. Don't let the situation consume you, as it will make you more unhappy and probably harm your productivity to boot.
5. Be sure to keep in mind that few people are completely without merit, so stay cordial. Capitalize on whatever value your chair has (even if it is just using their negative reputation with others to garner resources from people who want to keep you happy and stop you from finding another job) and don't contribute to a negative climate by returning the negativity.

Once you have tenure you will have greater job security and thus more flexibility in addressing your chair's behavior (if they are still in that position). But it remains important to assess the most productive ways to do that, as even tenured faculty can suffer retribution (and again, this is especially true for faculty who are women, people of color, gender or sexual minorities, or some combination thereof). If the chair is well-meaning but clueless, you might find it useful to speak to the person privately. Another option is to raise concerns publicly at a faculty meeting, making reference to a problematic "culture" or "process" without naming names. Or find other tenured colleagues who might be allies and strategize together. Doing these things might lead to change, either by changing the chair's behavior or by changing the chair. It might also be affirming to your less untenured colleagues, who probably share your concerns. But the other edicts still apply: find allies; protect your own sanity; and document, document, document.

For more information on dealing with a difficult climate in your department more generally, check out volumes 14 and 28 of *Hey Jane!*