

The Role of the Department Head

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Every year, the TSU Executive receives a report on the use of items/articles on the TSU website, www.tsuoecta.org. For the past several years, the most read item has been *The OECTA Guideline to the Roles and Responsibilities of Department Heads*. The document offers a brief review of what the law states, the changes in the role by law, a few do's and don'ts and some answers to current issues. And yet, each year the TSU release officers still receive numerous calls regarding issues surrounding department heads.

Some confusion may arise from a lack of understanding about how the role has changed over the years. Before the Harris government, the department head (DH) was very much a middle-management type of role. Being a DH was a stepping stone to becoming an administrator. It was an opportunity to exemplify, practice and hone one's leadership and management skills. For all intents and purposes, this part has not changed. What has changed is the "middle-management" piece. A DH is not a manager. A DH is a curriculum leader and a colleague with a very specific role. So what are they supposed to do?

The role has changed significantly. Today the DH has 3 primary functions: 1) to be a curriculum support to department colleagues if asked for assistance; 2) to be a conduit of information between the administration and the department members; and 3) to order resources. So what does that mean?

1) **Be a curriculum support to department colleagues**

Teachers can't know everything. Neither can department heads. But the intent is that the DH has the experience and access to materials that help support the development of lessons and assessments. It is a collegial role in supporting growth in colleagues and very much depending on trust. The DH will often attend Board and third party Professional Development activities, meetings and conferences in order to bring ideas and resources back to share with department colleagues. In the best case the trust and relations in departments foster this collegiality and openness.

The sharing of ideas is not, however, directing members to do new initiatives. The DH cannot assign work to their colleagues. They don't tell members what to do. They offer advice if asked and facilitate a process of collaborative dialogue in determining the direction that a department will take with respect to activities, SLIP goals and course offerings. Administrators must be careful not to draw heads into managerial functions like directing and reporting as this undermines the type of relationship needed for this role to be most effective.

The DH is a facilitator, not a manager. It is not the role of the DH to manage or assess other colleague's course assignments, assessments, timing of delivery, or class management techniques. This is up to the professional judgement of the teacher. If colleagues wish to collaborate on curriculum and/or assessments, it is by their choice and not the direction of administrators or the DH. Colleagues should not be criticized or sanctioned because they choose to exercise professional judgement which is their right. Ideally inexperienced or struggling teachers will find in their departments the trust and security to feel free to ask for support, to ask questions, and to share experiences.

Assessment of teachers is done by administrators during the TPA process.

2) **Be a conduit of information between the administration and the department members**

The DH attends the DH meetings with administrators in order to provide input from the department to the administrators and vice-versa. This can become a gray area for many DH's.

Providing input does not mean attending interviews for hiring department members or LTO's. Hiring is solely the role of the administrator.

It does not mean evaluating department members. For example, the DH has access to view the marks of their department member colleagues on Webmarks. TSU recommends that this access not be utilized. If it is ever utilized, because for example the teacher was not able to be contacted personally in time, we suggest it is a proper professional courtesy to inform the teacher as soon as possible. Looking at another colleagues files should be considered carefully by imagining how you would feel if someone viewed any of your files. It is not the role of the DH to review the marks of colleagues. It is certainly not the role of DH upon doing so to report to the administrator anything that the DH finds, what they believe, to be questionable. Doing so constitutes a negative report and such a report must then be provided in writing to the teacher as per Art. 18 1(b) of the Teaching Profession Act. If any teacher makes a negative report, administrators have an obligation to stop any such report and make clear these obligations before allowing the teacher to proceed.

Likewise, many administrators require the DH to “review exams” for colleagues. This is not a requirement of the role. The purpose of exam review should be solely for proofreading for typos or format. It is not the role of the DH to determine the types or numbers of questions for the exam. That is the role of the teacher/teachers of the course in their professional judgement which is upheld by the MoU of July 2012. Proofreading for typos can really be done by anyone. Some administrators require the DH to sign off on the exam. This is not necessary and TSU advises against doing so for reasons of liability. In a collegial department environment, the DH might assist with development of exams, if asked to do so by the teacher, but the content of the exam is not responsibility of the DH.

The DH is a facilitator, not a manager (yes, this is a repeat sentence). Nowhere is this seen more evidently than during scheduling in the spring of each year. Every year, the administration assigns the task of sorting out course assignments to the DH. The DH, however, cannot assign work to colleagues (yes, this is also a repeat sentence). As such, they do not assign or give courses to colleagues during the scheduling process. Course assignments are to be done in a collegial manner between department colleagues. How that is done can be different for each department. Some like to have a meeting where each person attaches coloured Post-its to a chart prepared by the DH. Others prefer the DH prepare a template that can then be discussed and negotiated between colleagues. Some departments do it like a draft and then hold a department meeting to review the suggestions. These are only three examples of many options. However it is done, all department members must be consulted—even those on leave who are returning in the new academic year. When a DH does not allow for the collaborative process, they leave their administrator vulnerable for a grievance for not ensuring the consultation process has occurred. Consultation, by the way, is not informing someone of their course load. Dialogue must be informed and meaningful and must occur before any decision is made. This does not mean that everyone will get everything they want but they need to have the opportunity to be heard. When a decision cannot be reached within the department, do not let a conflict rest there but rather refer it to LSSAC for input. If LSSAC is not sure, do not let conflict reside there either but seek input from SSSAC. The idea is to use a fair and open process and avoid letting conflict develop at the local level between colleagues. The point is that the DH does not have the final say. It is not their role.

3) **Order resources**

The role of the DH is to assist with the advocacy of acquiring resources and to actually fill out the paperwork for the order. This can be the most frustrating task of all. Many DH's do not receive a budget from their administrators. So managing department resources can be challenging at best. Also, with the loss of the DH period in which many of these tasks are completed, juggling time to complete paperwork can add to the stress of an already busy day.

While the role of the DH has changed significantly, it can still be very rewarding. Good leadership is a necessity for helping colleagues deal with their daily challenges. Collaboration and consultation make up the core of that leadership success. The role has changed, but its importance will remain. Despite an impoverished provincial model for department heads that does not provide proper release time or financial recognition, TSU values this leadership role and wants to help clarify it and offer support to the role within schools and departments.

For more information on the role of the DH, please visit www.tsuoecta.org for *The OECTA Guideline to the Roles and Responsibilities of Department Heads*.