

APS/AAPT Chairs Conference Breakout Report

Issues for Small Departments – First Session

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Introductions indicated that “small” departments can refer to either number of faculty or students. Departments present represented one to ten faculty, graduating zero to twelve majors annually.

Size matters.

Some noted advantages of a small department:

- Small size is a plus for establishing and maintaining rapport with students. More opportunity for personal interactions than in larger departments.
- Only faculty do the teaching, so students can better identify with the faculty member and with fellow students.
- Small departments may be better able to focus on undergraduate research.

Identified drawbacks to small departments:

- Small departments may lack flexibility of scheduling and course offerings.
- Small departments may lack “clout” within the institution, both in terms of obtaining resources and in making themselves heard in discussion of institutional priorities.
- Faculty in small departments typically have few or no colleagues in the same sub-discipline.
- It is probably more difficult for untenured faculty in a small department to maintain a viable level of research to establish a track record for tenure and promotion. Lacking this, how does the junior person establish a “national” reputation?

The latter concern led to a discussion of possible strategies for addressing the problem.

- It is vital for small departments (more so than in research universities) to provide appropriate mentoring for young faculty.
- Some funding resources may be targeted for the smaller departments. Suggested were NSF research opportunity awards, NASA, NIH, Research Corporation.
- Faculty in small departments should be encouraged to seek collaborations at geographically proximate research institutions.
- It is the responsibility of the chair to appropriately mentor new faculty, but also to educate the administration (and non-departmental tenure and promotion committees) about realistic expectations for scholarship in the small department

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setting, and to provide candid information to new hires about institutional expectations and realities.

Critical mass.

- Small departments may deliberately specialize in a specific sub-discipline to provide opportunities for collaboration within the department, i.e. the “one trick pony” strategy.
- Problems encountered by science students in a liberal arts setting should not be discipline specific. If physics students are not sufficient in number to have their own support group, attempt interdisciplinary support across the sciences. Perhaps institution of an interdisciplinary Junior/Senior seminar course.
- Providing student study and social space is vital to building community.