

Supporting PER as a Physics Department Chair

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What's the issue?

As PER grows, and as more PER people are taking jobs in physics departments, we need to be sure that physics departments understand the specific needs, concerns, and quirks of PER faculty.

One of the best ways to do this is to have the department chair be a supporter and advocate for PER faculty and for PER. So what can department chairs do to support PER faculty?

Concerns from PER faculty

26 PER faculty responded to the survey; their concerns were remarkably consistent.

The most common comment involved PER being viewed as "not real research"; the perception of the validity and legitimacy of PER is a very big concern among PER faculty.

Other concerns:

- Promotion and tenure expectations (both to faculty and to committee)
- Becoming de facto teaching resource person
- Not being considered for teaching upper level courses; assumption that preference/strength is only in intro classes
- Similarly, assigned to undergrad only committees or activities (same assumption)
- Inequity in resources: little/no research space, fewer research dollars or start-up funds, unwillingness to spend department money on teaching improvements
- Hiring concerns: hire one or additional PER faculty; PER people as staff only, not faculty

Recommendations: A Short List

Things physics department chairs can do to support PER faculty:

- Be explicit about viewing PER as valid research with equal value as more traditional research areas
- Treat PER faculty equitably: appropriate resources, space, teaching assignments, committee assignments
- When hiring, have clear expectations about what the job really is about (Teaching resource person? Lab manager? Lower-level only? Pre-service teachers only?) If hiring a PER faculty member as a regular physics faculty member, they need to have a similar job description to others in the department (teaching load, undergrad research expectations, service expectations, start-up funds and ongoing support)
- Have clear expectations about promotion & tenure both for PER faculty and for committees (what journals "count", expected service load, expected outreach activities, etc.)
- Do not treat PER faculty as teaching resource staff (unless it's part of the job description)
- Do not expect PER faculty to participate in all educational outreach activities
- Do not assume PER faculty are only interested in lower-level courses
- Give PER equitable treatment as a discipline within the department (hiring, research space, office space, web presence, departmental materials)

Further data analysis and recommendations available in paper format

For a copy of this poster or the associated paper, or to provide comments to the researcher, please contact Laura McCullough at McCulloughL@uwstout.edu. Website: <http://www.uwstout.edu/faculty/mccullough/index.cfm> (link to papers/presentations on right). QR code directly to papers/presentations page.



Survey to PER faculty: Who responded

A link to a short survey was sent out to two PER listservs. 29 people responded; the majority (26) were faculty.

Department size:

- 14% from departments of 1-5 faculty
- 31% from departments of 6-10 faculty
- 21% from departments of 11-15 faculty
- 14% from departments of 16-20 faculty
- 21% from departments of >20 faculty

25 of 29 were from physics departments; others included Natural Science, Education & Science, and Physical Science

22 of 29 had a department chair who had a background in traditional physics research; 2 had a chair in PER

15 of 29 were the only PER faculty in their department; 6 people were one of two PER faculty; 5 were one of three; 1 was one of four; and 2 had more than 5 PER colleagues

Differences between Physics and Education Departments

Are there different concerns for PER faculty in physics departments and education departments?

The most frequent comments involved different types of legitimacy issues. In traditional physics departments, PER is viewed as lesser or not legitimate. In education departments, PER may be viewed as an outsider since it often is not associated with licensure or K-12 issues.

Most respondents stated that the issues for PER faculty were quite different between the two departments.

