Department Chair Online Resource Center

Constructing the Role of Department Chair

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Making a quick scan of *The Chronicle of Higher Education* not long ago, I saw a headline that virtually jumped off the page: "I Used to Run a Department, but Then I Got Wise" (Davis, 2002). The article was worth reading because the author confronted the important questions that many chairs ask: "What is my real job?" and "Am I in the right job?"

The literature on chairing emphasizes either the importance of leadership and vision for the department or the role of juggling detailed tasks "to keep the trains running on time," as one author put it. All agree, however, that the chair's role requires individuals to fulfill diverse—if not divergent—responsibilities and that fulfilling these responsibilities requires a different skill set from the one that originally attracted them to the independent life of the scholar.

To understand how different chairs perceive their role, we conducted qualitative interviews with academic department chairs in a four-campus university system as part of a larger department chair study. We identified "successful department chairs" by asking prominent department chairs and deans to identify the chairs they perceived as successful and to explain why they identified them as doing well. We recorded and analyzed our interviews, looking for repeated themes using the constant comparison method and conceptual categories derived from the interviews.

Chairs identified four major roles: administrative, leadership, interpersonal, and resource development. Each of these can be further subdivided (see Table). The following section describes each of these functions in more detail, and offers a sampling of typical comments from the chairs who we interviewed.

TABLE: THE MAJOR ROLES OF A DEPARTMENT CHAIR

Administrative roles

Fiscal overseer

Schedule coordinator

Report generator

Staff supervisor

Leadership roles

Visionary

Internal advocate

Internal intermediary

External liaison

Curriculum leader

Role model

Interpersonal roles

Counselor

Coach

Mediator

Climate regulator

Resource development roles

Faculty recruiter

Faculty mentor

Faculty evaluator

Resource warrior

ADMINISTRATIVE ROLES

The administrative role includes four specific sub-roles, in which success depends chiefly on careful attention to details.

Fiscal Overseer: "Obviously, watching the budget is a really big function, to make sure you don't get the department into financial distress."

Chairs must monitor the department budget to ensure that the department's work is done and that they do not overspend their allocations. Chairs also described this role as increasingly requiring them to find creative ways to extend their budgets, including external fund raising.

Schedule Coordinator: "At certain times of the year, you're concerned with scheduling the allocated faculty to courses."

Chairs schedule courses, times, rooms, and professors each term. In so doing, they have responsibilities to the institution and its students to see that courses are appropriately scheduled to facilitate graduation and the fulfillment of requirements. Chairs also are responsible for helping faculty mange their time efficiently and for balancing teaching loads across the department.

Report Generator: "There is a significant amount of time spent on paperwork. In the five years I was chair, there were more and more and more reports and things of that sort that were required earlier and earlier. And it really was a huge burden. There's a big turnover this year in chairs in the college and there's a lot of factors, but I think it's a hell of a lot of paperwork."

Particularly in public institutions, the demand for reports can become overwhelming. It is a task that chairs may come to resent, because it often involves searching for answers to someone else's questions-questions that may not seem germane to the scholarly concerns of either the chair or the department. Even when the reports are clearly important, however, the sheer volume and the scheduling of those requests often conflict with the pace of teaching and research.

Staff Supervisors: "What takes the largest amount of time that I didn't anticipate was dealing with personnel problems. This requires the chair to be familiar with procedural details regarding staff benefits (e.g., sick leave, vacation policies, and staff evaluations for raises)."

Supervising staff means dealing with an array of issues, from hiring and supporting faculty, to managing conflicts that may arise among staff members. In all cases, the need to accurately absorb information and dispense it in a timely manner can challenge any department chair, particularly those new to the role.

LEADERSHIP ROLES

The six leadership roles encompass diverse responsibilities but share the goal of improving the department and an abiding belief in the future of the department.

Visionary: "I'm not a comfortable maintainer, that's not my thing. I like to be cutting edge. I like to be out there on the front. I like to be a visionary. And you don't do that if you're doing what everyone else is doing."

The visionary is the transformational leader capable of creating space for change and generating consensus among the faculty. One chair went so far as to describe the role as placing the department at the cutting edge. Among the chairs who we interviewed, those who saw themselves as visionaries contrasted their styles with "caretaker" chairs.

Internal Advocate: "It's my job to let him (the dean) know how things look at the department level. It's communicating our situation and also advocating for the department, for specific members of the department."

As internal advocates, chairs represent, promote, and support the faculty and the overall department to relevant internal audiences, the most important of which are the dean's office and other administrators. As one chair put it, "My role involves educating and persuading administrators at other levels about the quality of the department."

Internal Intermediary: "You have a dual responsibility. There are always unpleasant pieces of news that one has to take to one's colleagues. On the other hand, the next step on the ladder is dean."

While department chairs sometimes advocate on behalf of the faculty and department to the dean, at other times they will find themselves explaining the dean's actions to the faculty. This intermediary role can create tension, because the chair is perceived as having both administrative and faculty obligations.

External Liaison: "Another facet to my job is alumni relations and bridge-building and maintaining bridges between the school and alumni."

An increasingly important facet of a chair's responsibility is establishing relationships with external audiences. Launching these connections with audiences outside the university community and advocating the department's mission is a way for chairs to advance the vision of the department. In interviews with chairs, the external audiences mentioned most frequently were alumni, potential employers for students, potential students and high schools (for student recruitment), the community, granting agencies, and donors.

Curriculum Leader: "Part of my task is [related to the] curriculum. I am helping lead the faculty in curriculum development and program redesign."

The chair takes a leadership role with respect to the department curriculum. Planning, revising, and implementing changes in undergraduate and graduate programs must be a recurrent process that the chair monitors. It is closely related to being a role model (see next section), in that the chair's actions can encourage the faculty to work on curriculum development.

Role Model: "In essence, [being a role model] means that I am responsible for everything. It reduces [my priorities] to the primary priorities of our department, which are teaching professional students, teaching graduate students, and being productive scholars, which, for scientists, means doing research. The approach of the previous dean and of our current dean is that the chair should lead primarily by example."

While literature on chairing often identifies chairs as model scholars, we assert that chairs must play a broader role, as models in both teaching and research. If chairs expect their faculty to excel as teachers and researchers, then they should lead by example.

INTERPERSONAL ROLES

The four interpersonal roles of a chair are based on developing productive relationships between and among individuals in the workplace.

Counselor: "Some of them [faculty] think I can solve anything, while others have a more distinct view that there are some things that I can't solve. It's not only that I've had administrative experience; I've chaired all of the most important committees on campus except one. And I pretty much know who to call. So when there's a problem, some of my colleagues think whatever it is, somehow I can magically make it go away. And most of the time I can."

The role of counselor involves being accessible, establishing relationships, and being willing to listen to concerns. Some chairs saw their counseling roles as problem fixers. Chairs noticed that some faculty members required more of their time as a counselor than others.

Coach: "Coaching is an important part of being, you know, the manager. Coaching is a fairly intense interpersonal experience, and I think that is important. That is what we need."

Successful coaches encourage, motivate, and inspire faculty, staff, and students to greater levels of excellence. The chairs with whom we spoke were most concerned about motivating their faculty to be successful researchers and to obtain externally funded research.

Mediator: "We don't have a complaint box, but they just stand in line. You know how it goes—students, faculty, and staff."

Mediation often requires one to work with difficult people. As mediator, the chair hears and attempts to resolve complaints from faculty, staff, students, parents, and administrators—many of which the chair may consider petty. Interpersonal conflict negotiation and problem-solving skills are useful in this role.

Climate Regulator: "You have to be able to [find] satisfaction in knowing that you have created an environment that people can thrive in."

"You've got to create an environment that encourages productivity. You've got to give [faculty] freedom, encourage them, and take the frustrations out of their way."

It is clear from our interviews that this function can take varied forms, but the dominant theme is to create an environment that will encourage faculty productivity.

RESOURCE DEVELOPMENT ROLES

Resources are broadly defined to include faculty, as well as other assets that can be increased in order to advance the department.

Faculty Recruiter: "I'm spending a lot of my time on faculty recruitment. And I should be."

The chair plays a primary role in hiring new department faculty, even when a search committee exists. New hires are instrumental to accomplishing the chair's vision and can influence the climate of the department.

Faculty Mentor: "I take it as making sure that our new hires stay on track. That's not anywhere in the [job description], but it's really easy for assistant professors to get off track. Inform them of stuff. I do quite a bit of that."

This role encompasses providing faculty with professional development opportunities, answering their questions, and providing advice and information to ensure their professional success and retention. Chairs take assistant professors under their wings, making sure that new hires get the information they need.

Faculty Evaluators: "I have to write tenure recommendations. That's a time-consuming job that has to be done extremely well. The good tenure dossier is one that [raises] no questions."

Evaluations are required for faculty hiring, annual merit raises, retention, promotion, and tenure decisions. Some chairs experience tension in balancing their mentor and evaluator roles, acknowledging the difficulty in writing evaluations because they must be adapted to the individual and the objective of the evaluation.

Resource Warrior: "You've got to provide resources—time and dollars—so the faculty can succeed."

"I really feel that any administrator's job, and my primary job [as a chair], was to make sure that the only limit to the productivity of the faculty was their own creativity, enthusiasm, and willingness to do things. I was going to make sure there were no obstacles in their way, no committee assignments, nothing that would block them from achieving their dreams."

As these chairs stated, the chair maintains responsibility for finding the resources that faculty members need to do their jobs. The chair's goal is to remove obstacles from the path of productive faculty members so that they and the department can reach their potential. The warrior metaphor is chosen purposefully, because chairs wage never-ending battles for increasingly scarce resources, be it money, space, staff, equipment, or time.

In conclusion, the job of an academic department chair is complex, requiring talents in a number of wide-ranging areas. It requires setting aside many of the skills typically associated with being a professor and focusing on the interests of a broader group. While requiring organizational skills and the ability to manage details, many of the department chair roles draw upon softer, people-oriented skills. Department chair is not a job for the weak hearted. It can require the chair to be a banker, camp counselor, mediator, public relations expert, and coach. One of the toughest aspects is focusing on the big picture: mentoring younger faculty members, articulating a vision, mediating conflicts, and promoting the success of the department-all while addressing the administrative details that keep a department going on a day-to-day basis. The unique nature of the position may give new meaning to the

notion of "vision" as it relates to academic departments: focusing one eye on the big picture and the other eye on the details.