

Perspectives From a New Department Chair

Jack W. Wescott

After three challenging and exciting years as a new chair, I am presenting the following thoughts—some perhaps profound, but the majority quite trivial about my perceptions of a new chair. Many of my comments presented are based on informal observations; however, there was an opportunity for me to review the research about the roles and responsibilities of the department chair in higher education. For organizational purposes, this paper is organized into the following sections: the importance of chairing a department, characteristics of chairs, preparation for becoming a chair, and the often-conflicting management and leadership responsibilities.

Importance of Chairing a Department

The chair job is the most difficult on campus in many respects. First, the continuous need for attention to details, second the need to make decisions which have an impact on the lives of those with whom you also deal on a personal basis, and third, when things go wrong the chair carries directly or indirectly a good share of the responsibility. (Bennett, 1982, p. 52)

Few would argue that chairs are important in the overall academic leadership team on campus. As early as 1942, the chair was characterized as the key position in a department and in the institution (Jennerich, 1981). Furthermore, an editorial in *The Journal of Higher Education* noted that “no one plays a larger part in determining the character of higher education institutions than the department chair” (Patton, 1961, p. 459).

A recent advertisement in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* (April 4, 1997, p. B96) announced a nation-

ally respected leadership program for department chairpersons by terming them “the people responsible for leading the units where change takes place in higher education.” This statement eliminates any doubt about the importance of the position. Further, department chairs make up possibly the largest administrative group in U.S. colleges and universities (Norton, 1980). In 1997, Scott reported that an estimated 80,000 department chairs were involved in higher education and one in three faculty serves in the position at some point during his or her career.

A summary of the research on the importance of chairing an academic department identifies three key factors. First, chairs have daily contact with administrators, faculty, and students (Weinberg, 1984). In most administrative hierarchy of an institution, chairs are directly responsible for the department’s daily operations. Waltzer (1975) identified chairs as the “single most important link” in the campus structure between administrators, faculty, programs, and students. This link serves as the conduit through which intentions of top management flow down and information flows up. As such, the chair often serves as negotiator between departmental goals that reflect institutional priorities and the individual goals and agendas of faculty and students.

Second, on most campuses, the chair has the authority over matters that are important to the faculty and staff: curriculum, budget, faculty hiring, and evaluation. The chair is the “custodian of academic standards” charged with monitoring the department curriculum, seeing that course assignments are made judiciously and that individual faculty members’ talents are aligned with instructional needs, promoting racial and gender balance in the faculty, encouraging continued personal and professional growth, and attesting to the adequacy of instruction and

research (Bennett & Figuli, 1990).

Third, chairs serve as important decision makers. From the perspective of a new chair, there are some unique attributes associated with the decision-making process in a department that I would like to share. For example, immediately on being named to the position, everyone expected me to be intimately familiar with all the practices, policies, and procedures throughout the university. One morning, for example, three phone calls sought answers to each of the following questions: “Are the new regulations under the Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1992 applicable to one-year temporary faculty?” “What is the distinction between Category I and Category II graduate faculty status?” “What is the maximum hours per week that a faculty member can consult outside the university?” It soon became obvious that there is a great deal of information about the university of which I was not aware.

Everyone also assumed the chair possesses unlimited power and authority to solve any and all problems. Generally speaking, faculty, staff, and students do not understand that all kinds of checks and balances exist within the academic community. Aside from one’s own conscience and the matters of academic freedom and integrity, there are policies to follow at all levels. Making a decision that is contradictory to the established guidelines is always unwise and sometimes illegal. It also appears that there is an inverse relationship between the importance of a decision and the amount of time you have to make it. That is, important decisions seem to be due tomorrow and those less important decisions are due at the end of next month.

It is also important to learn “when” and “if” a decision must be made. Many problems will go away if a decision is postponed. Of course this is an oversimplification and not recommended as good practice. But the fact remains that some problems simply go away. Example, a faculty member would confront me in the hallway about an urgent problem. (By the way—I have learned to never make a decision in the hallway or, even worse, the restroom.) The faculty member would make an appointment to see me regarding the urgent situation. Then, moments before the meeting, I would receive a phone call indicating the situation had been resolved and the appointment cancelled.

Characteristics of Chairs

Generally speaking, the academy offers no clear line of succession for becoming a department chair. While some large departments may have an assistant or associate department chairperson, this position is not the norm. Moreover, even having such a position does not mean that the person holding that title, and therefore assumed to be gaining some acquaintance with the roles and responsibilities of the chair, will be appointed to the position when it becomes available. There are many reasons why an individual is ultimately elected or appointed to the position, but preparation and base of skills and knowledge are not always two of them.

According to research conducted by Carroll (1990), the typical career path for a department chair begins within an academic discipline as a graduate student, then as faculty in the same discipline, moving up through faculty ranks, and eventually becoming the department chair. Stepping into the role of chair occurs when faculty are in their middle to upper 40s (e.g., 46 in Carroll, 1990; 48 in Boice & Myers, 1986). Chairs serve on the average of six years, and 65% return to faculty status immediately after their service (Carroll, 1990). Similarly, Hecht, Higgerson, Gmelch, and Tucker (1999) determined that the nationwide turnover rate for chairs is 15 to 20% per year, with the term of service usually running six years. Female chairs are significantly younger than their male counterparts when they take the position and are more likely than males to become a department chair before receiving full professorship (Carroll, 1990). In our profession, it is important to note that according to the *Industrial Teacher Education Directory* (Bell, 1999) there are 12 women chairs, coordinators, or leaders for the 210 institution listings, which translates to approximately 5.7%.

Lack of preparation

Regardless of gender, individuals assuming the position of chair experience abrupt changes in their work life, adding to the strains and stresses of academic life. Facing these roles is compounded by the fact that chairs come out of the ranks of faculty in disciplines that might be far afield from management and leadership. The problem is also magnified because most chairs have no formal preparation for the position. More frequently than not, the chair’s position is filled

by an individual who is likely to be unprepared for the tasks. Also, Gillespie (1998) noted that very few set out to become a department chair, or at least few will admit that is a professional goal, and there are few programs in place for the training of new chairpersons.

Usually, regardless of how the decision is made, chairs are not chosen because they are good administrators, managers, leaders or communicators. This isn't so much an indictment of higher education as it reflects a simple fact: Most academic administrators, especially at the department level, are educated on the job. (Hickson & Stacks, 1992, p. vii)

Although universities have recently begun to be attentive to the need for preparation for the teaching role in higher education, there is still a need for similar programs to address the issues of chairing a department.

Managing Versus Leading

One of the greatest challenges that most new department chairs face is balancing the management and leadership responsibilities. "Chairs, like the god Janus, have two faces: a manager and a leader" (Gmelch & Burns, 1991, p. 4). A number of writers have addressed the real and implied definitional distinctions between managing and leading. In an article on organizational leadership, Bennis (1980) suggested that managing and leading differ in a number of ways. Leaders are involved in activities of vision and judgment while managers engage in activities of efficiency. Managers engage in the day-to-day conduct of the organization while leaders transcend the everyday organizational routines to guide the organization.

Most new chairs bring a variety of new ideas, goals, and a sense of vision to their position. These ideas are ones that may guide the department through the chair's term of office and beyond. They constitute the impact that the new chair hopes to have on his or her department, the mark he or she will leave. As such, these inno-

vations and creative ideas fall most clearly within the boundaries of leading rather than managing. However, out of necessity it is the managerial role that the chairs learn first. In addition, the managerial procedures related to travel, promotion and tenure, merit pay, accreditations, campus governance, and budgets often receive priority. These items tend to constitute the everyday work of the chair, the efficient conduct of the department in relation to the larger university.

Actual leadership, taking new directions and implementing a vision, tends to come later in the chair's tenure. New chairs must learn to manage successfully before they can effectively lead within the university system. The ability to communicate wisely and well is the key to the Janus-faced roles of the academic chair. Despite the unusual management structure in which they find themselves, chairs still exert considerable influence on program direction and personnel development within their academic units.

Chairing a department revolves around three highly interrelated factors. First, chairs have daily contact with administrators, faculty, and students. Second, chairs are important decision makers. And third, on most campuses the chair has the authority over matters important to the faculty and staff. Furthermore, one of the most significant challenges that most new chairs face is balancing the management and leadership responsibilities of an academic department. As a new chair, it appears that the leadership or visionary role of the chair is often diverted by the numerous details of management responsibilities. However, despite the mirage of management duties, it is the leadership role that is critical to addressing the important issues of the profession.

Dr. Jack W. Wescott is chair of the Department of Industry and Technology at Ball State University in Muncie, Indiana. He is a member of Beta chapter of Epsilon Pi Tau. Dr. Wescott holds the honorary's Laureate Citation.

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