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THE EVOLVING ROLE OF DEPARTMENT CHAIR: LEADING FACULTY THROUGH TIMES OF CHANGE

Description

How does one manage conflict and change in a very volatile economic climate where academia is experiencing greater accountability, increased emphasis on outcome assessment, declining enrollment and great uncertainty for the future? The role of department chair has, in many cases, become one entrenched in conflict between the role of faculty and administrator and has experienced a tremendous evolution over the last 25 years.

Keywords

change, leadership, conflict, administrative, managerial, excellence, retention, strategic planning

THE EVOLVING ROLE OF DEPARTMENT CHAIR: LEADING FACULTY THROUGH TIMES OF CHANGE

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Abstract

Having served as department chair for 25 years, I have witnessed a tremendous evolution in the role of chair as economic, social and student climates have changed. My paper will summarize collected data from chairs of departments of various sizes and types in order to discuss and understand better our ever changing role as we see responsibilities of delegating, leading change, creative budgeting and fundraising, grant writing and managing conflict become vital to our positions.

Introduction

I have seen the role of chair become increasingly managerial and administrative whereby we are now often intimately involved in strategic planning (departmental, college and university-wide), budget, fundraising, managing conflict, student retention, motivating and encouraging faculty to achieve academic excellence while maintaining scholarship and research, and leading change while maintaining our own standards of excellence in the classroom and in research.

The increasing emphasis on program assessment and outcomes necessary for accreditation and evaluation on many levels has taxed our resource of time management. Performance appraisals with increased emphasis on teacher "accountability" have also tremendously impacted our role.

So how do we juggle it all in order to maintain our status as working, thriving full-time faculty while increasing our duties and responsibilities as administrators and/or managers?

My Background

I have been at Sacred Heart University for almost 37 years, of which 32 have been as a FT faculty member (5 years as an adjunct in mathematics, 3 years FT in mathematics, 29 years in computer science). During that time I have been a department chair for almost 26 years as well as the graduate program director for 15 of those years. The big question is WHY?

Why?

Why be chair?

Is it because it seems like fun?

Is it full of adventure?

Is it peaceful and relaxing?

Most chairs would probably answer a resounding NO to all of these! But obviously there are some compelling reasons why we all decide to take it on. Here are some observations from other chairs I have spoken with:

1. You feel you can lead the department in the direction it needs to go;
2. You are respected by your colleagues and they want you to be chair;
3. You like the perks you get as chair (i.e. release time, modest stipends, being more involved with the strategic planning of the department, college and university, and being invited to an endless number of meetings);
4. You like the “power”;
5. You are “insane”.

**Anonymous Quotes from Actual Chairs Regarding Compensation
(from Chronicle of Higher Education)**

The following are actual anonymous (unedited) quotes from various department chairs throughout the country when asked the question:

“What is the REAL compensation for being a chair?”

1. “At my 4/4 state regional campus the chair of our department gets 50% course load reduction, a bigger office, and a stipend of less than \$2000 for managing our 17 person department. The real "payoff" is that the chair gets first crack at teaching summer courses regardless of seniority. If he takes on two courses a summer that means around \$7000.”
2. “A large office, a parking spot, and a bigger desk--though he may have bought that himself. Damn little for all the aggravation.”
3. “Psychic dollars.”
4. “Power or the perception of such.”
5. “Here it is a one course reduction (to a 2/2 load), about \$3000 during the academic year, another \$3000 for the summer and a guaranteed summer course, which is worth about \$4000. So, you end up with a 2/2/1 load rather than a 3/3 load, get paid about \$10k, and work about 10k more hours a year.... no thanks!”

My Main Responsibilities as Chair in My First Year (1987)

In 1987 my responsibilities as chair included:

1. composing the schedule of UG classes for two semesters and summers;
2. evaluating FT faculty in the department;
3. advising students (we only had UG students in our department then);
4. hiring adjuncts;
5. staying within the budget developed by the administration for my department;
6. reviewing curriculum;
7. reporting directly to Dean of division and Associate Vice President for Academics;

My Main Responsibilities as Chair Now (2013)

In 2013 my responsibilities as chair include:

1. composing the schedule of UG and Grad classes for two semesters, three trimesters and several intensive periods;
2. evaluating FT faculty in the department;

3. supervising the advising of students (UG and graduate students numbering about 175 total);
4. hiring, evaluating and training adjuncts;
5. developing, presenting and justifying budget for department;
6. overseeing new curriculum development for the department with an emphasis on timely and relevant courses and programs;
7. reporting to dean and working closely with VP of Academic Affairs and Provost;
8. dealing with issues about class sizes, budgets and retention;
9. advising all graduate students (as graduate program director);
10. working with admissions to recruit new students (UG and Graduate level);
11. recruiting international students;
12. serving on numerous committees at college and university levels;
13. assisting with career development and job placement;
14. communicating with parents as needed (current and potential students);
15. maintaining alumni relations;
16. writing or supervising grants, fundraising and managing the department;
17. being perceived as a middle manager with faculty status;

**Anonymous Quotes from Actual Chairs Regarding their Primary Responsibilities
(from Chronicle of Higher Education)**

The following are actual anonymous (unedited) quotes from various department chairs throughout the country when asked the question:

“What do chairs see as their primary responsibilities?”

1. “you lose a certain degree of the flexibility you have as a faculty member - you have to adjust yourself to other people's schedules (Students, Faculty, Deans, Provosts, Presidents). ... the job is a mix of fire-fighting, paper-pushing, advocacy, and leadership (and the percentages in each of these areas fluctuate over time - making the job interesting, IMHO).”
2. “Some of the administrative stuff comes with the job (faculty evaluations), but it is possible to delegate some things. I was actually less involved with assessment as chair because it was done by a committee that I wasn't on (but had been chair of before I became department chair). Sometimes leading means doing all the work yourself, but sometimes it just means ~~herding the cats~~ mobilizing the faculty toward a common goal.”
3. “The reason you do a chair position is to develop the department--you get to build programs, help senior faculty win more grants, and develop the newer faculty. It is about people. You get more access to building the college and whole university (or whole SLAC) as one of the administrative leaders. If that does not sound fundamentally interesting to you, don't take the job.”

So How Does a Chair Do All of This in 2013?

1. be super organized and prepared well ahead of deadlines;
2. never assume you will get to your office and have time to do something other than problem solve;
3. hire extremely competent support staff who know you, your style and can act on your behalf for routine tasks;
4. seek and maintain the support of your department faculty;
5. seek and maintain the support of your superiors as much as possible;
6. always remember that you represent your department because in many people's eyes you ARE the department;
7. be social and articulate and fair;
8. be willing to deal with problems at the student, parent, department, college and university level;
9. be able to work with senior faculty who are less than willing to accept necessary change;
10. be willing to mentor new faculty;
11. TIME MANAGE EXTREMELY WELL.

Some Noteworthy Observations

1. there is no real training to be a chairperson because every department in every university is unique with a different set of issues to deal with;
2. getting advice from a previous chair or a current chair with longevity can be helpful;
3. the ability to delegate well is essential to your success and is something that many chairs (including myself) still struggle with;
4. your willingness to admit that you are human, with a life outside the university, which includes family, social and personal issues that need to be dealt with is a plus;
5. admitting your flaws and asking for help when you need it will often motivate other faculty to step up to the plate;
6. maintaining your presence in the classroom and keeping up relationships with students helps remind you why you are doing this in the first place;
7. preserving the faculty aspect of your job is essential to your well-being as chair.

Being Chair in 2013..Some General Observations

1. you have to deal with "helicopter parents" even before the students arrive on campus;
2. everything is about measurable outcomes and most faculty hate this;
3. budgets differ wildly among colleges and departments;
4. because of budgetary considerations, retention and recruitment often take on disproportional importance;
5. politics are as rampant as ever in academia;
6. lawsuits by grieving faculty, unhappy students and parents aren't so unusual.

Discussion Points

What follows are 2 scenarios that department chairs often face (or will face) during their tenure as chair. After each of these I will summarize comments that were given to me after some informal polling of chairs both locally and nationally. Please note that these are not necessarily my views.

Discussion Point 1

“You have a relatively new faculty member in your department who is most ambitious, extremely competent, well-liked and appears to be a “rising” star. You are seeing clues however that this person is power hungry, often bypasses you and goes directly to the dean and AVP to discuss things. You have the feeling that this person wants to be chair at all costs but you aren’t ready to give it up. What do you do?”

Here are some suggestions: (from sources mentioned earlier)

1. Attempt to have a friendly, non-threatening, informal meeting with the faculty member indicating that you need to be consulted first on issues and suggestions prior to the faculty member contacting anyone whom you or your supervisor reports to. Let the faculty member know that you and the department are most appreciative of all that s(he) does for the department and the university but that in order to do YOUR job effectively, you need for everyone to adhere to the established protocol of going to the chair first. Explain that you will be happy to set up a meeting with your dean and/or AVP if the point of discussion warrants it and that you would be happy to give this faculty member credit for bringing this to your attention.
2. Establish whether this is an overzealous faculty member who wants to share ideas with everyone or is truly someone who is trying to take control of the department. If it appears to be the latter, consult first with other department members that you know well and trust to solicit their opinions. If in fact they are in agreement with you, suggest that they perhaps attempt to talk with the individual to reinforce the protocol of the department. If this still does not get the message across request a meeting with your immediate superiors (i.e. dean and or AVP) and explain the situation to them. Let them know that you would prefer that they not meet with this individual without your being present.
3. Work out a plan (if you feel that this person is indeed “chair” material) to increase the person’s responsibility and allow them to shadow you on some occasions to get a feel for what is involved in the job. Let the individual know what your plans are for the future such as how long you expect to be chair, if you will be taking any leave or sabbatical in the near future (which would warrant having an “acting chair”) and simultaneously discreetly talk to others in the department about whether or not they think that this individual work be a good candidate for chair in the future.
4. If the individual is clearly not chair material and very unlikely to be supported by either the department faculty or administration for a chair position in the future, indicate this to the person with documented reasons. Assuming that this person is likely to be tenured and has

been effective in the classroom and produced scholarship as required by your institution try to find other possible positions that they might be suitable for (e.g. undergraduate coordinator, club moderator, representative of the department in a university committee, curriculum leader, etc.).

5. If none of the above scenarios are working and the individual is not making any attempt to cooperate with you and the department on protocol, document this, put this on an annual review and suggest that perhaps the person might have more opportunities in another venue.

Discussion Point 2

“You have been chair a long time, longer than fifteen years. You are tired, want your life back and wish to return full-time to teaching without all the responsibilities and headaches of being chair. Everyone in your department respects you and wants you to remain as chair and no one is really up to taking over.

What do you do?

If you do give up the chair how will you handle NOT being the decision maker?

How will you feel being evaluated by someone you used to evaluate?”

Here are some suggestions: (from sources mentioned earlier)

1. First and foremost you need to truly gauge how ready you are to give up the position. If you are not being asked or coerced to give it up assess how important being chair is to your academic life? Do the pros outweigh the cons? If not are there possible scenarios that can remove some of the cons and make you want to keep the position?
2. If indeed you do give up the chair it will most likely be very difficult for you NOT to be a prime decision maker for the department. There are a number of scenarios that can come into play here. First, are you able to give input as to who might succeed you? If so do you feel that the person likely to take over as chair is someone who will effect a relatively seamless transition? Or do you see this person as someone who probably won't solicit your help and will likely make or attempt to make some drastic changes? If the person succeeding you wants your input and help in a transition period it will be much easier for you.
3. As for the evaluation process it may seem awkward but as a former chair you should try to make the process as comfortable as possible for the new chair by providing as much documentation (e.g. student evaluations, citations for publications, announcements of presentations, service areas) so that the process becomes very objective.
4. If you are ready to give up the chair and feel that you will be very comfortable in your new role you should set out a plan to become involved in something outside of your university that you have wanted to do but could not in the past because of time issues. This could involve more travel, taking up a new hobby, reading and/or publishing more, taking a class in something that you always wanted to learn or just setting aside some relaxation time.
5. Remember that this is a big decision for someone like you. This is not a typical “round-robin” chair position whereby people in the department alternate the responsibility every 3 or

even 5 years. It will be hard in some ways to let go. Think about it and talk with your colleagues. Don't rush into it.

Summary

The job of chairperson does in fact vary widely from department to department and university to university. There is no doubt that the responsibilities assigned to chairs have evolved tremendously within the last 25 years. Despite many having opinions to the contrary, I believe that not everyone has the capacity to be an effective chair. Organization, a profound knowledge of the workings of the university and the people in key positions as well as the ability to sometimes not take everything too seriously are important components to success as chair.

Closing Quote

“Be true to yourself, enjoy the ride and never lose sight of the ultimate goal in higher education: making a difference in people's lives.”

Domenick J Pinto, Academic Chairperson's Conference, 2013