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The Challenges of Being Chair in 2015: A 28 Year Perspective

Description

Having been department chair for the last 28 years and realizing that I will be continuing as chair for at least several more years have caused me to stop and reflect about how the responsibilities and duties of chair have evolved and continue to evolve in our academic world of economic uncertainty and (in many cases) declining student populations. I will emphasize in my paper three specific areas of great importance in 2015:

1. The ability to manage conflict;
2. The desire to become entrepreneurial and creative in undertaking new areas of study, new delivery systems, and in many cases, new student populations;
3. The incredibly important skill of time managing well.

Keywords

change, leadership, conflict, managerial skills, time management, retention, entrepreneurial, faculty

The Challenges of Being Chair in 2015: A 28 Year Perspective

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Abstract

For 28 years as chair, I have witnessed the evolution of the role of chairperson as entrepreneurial skills, conflict resolution and time management have become increasingly vital to the success of the chair. My paper will summarize the challenges that chairs must now face and overcome in 2015. This paper is intended to help relatively new and new chairs face scenarios and employ methods to problem solve them.

Introduction

Having been department chair for the last 28 years and realizing that I will be continuing as chair for at least several more years has caused me to stop and reflect about how the responsibilities and duties of chair have evolved and continue to evolve in our academic world of economic uncertainty and (in many cases) declining student populations. I will emphasize in my talk three specific areas of great importance in 2015:

1. The ability to manage conflict;
2. The desire to become entrepreneurial and creative in undertaking new areas of study, new delivery systems, and in many cases, new student populations;
3. The incredibly important skill of time managing well.

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.

Conflict management and resolution is (many will say) an obvious part of the job as chair. That may be so but that DOES not make it easy. There are so many areas from which conflict can arise: students dissatisfied with a particular class, professor or grade; faculty who disagree on fundamental department matters or who become too political; problems that arise within the administrative structure of the academy; budget restrictions.

Declining populations in many cases have forced universities to significantly increase their “base”. Recruiting international students, non-traditional students, adding non-traditional courses of study and exploring new delivery methods are all part of the new “entrepreneurial” chair position.

So we now look at time management. This is not a skill that one inherently possesses. I feel that having “survived” as chair for 28 years (and for the most part, having been considered a fairly successful chair) I should have this “nailed”. But frankly I don’t think anyone does. This is, to me, the most challenging part of this very complicated role.

My Background

I have been at Sacred Heart University for 39 years, of which 34 have been as a FT faculty member (5 years as an adjunct in mathematics, 3 years FT in mathematics, 31 years in computer science). During that time I have been a department chair for 28 years as well as the graduate program director for 17 of those years for the MSCSIT (Comp SCI) and the MSCYB (Cyber Security) programs.

Who and what is a “Chair”?

So *WHO* can or should be a chair?

Being a chair is a 24/7 job for most of us. Unless you are in a very small department the job puts you “on call” most of the time. You will need to be a good (or better yet “great”) manager...especially of time. Your social and political skills need to be honed. And obviously you need to be able to lead but also delegate, resolve but also mediate, and sell without acting like a used car salesman. (a little humor never hurts!)

So *HOW* does a chair do all of this in 2015?

There are four essential qualities that to me embody the essence of being a chair:

1. Be versed in CONFLICT MANAGEMENT and RESOLUTION;
2. TIME MANAGE very well;
3. Be ENTREPRENEURIAL;
4. Know the administration and get involved in university matters reaching beyond your department and college.

Conflict Management...Essential Skills for Chairs (these are not easy)

These are all useful tools to use in conflict management involving faculty:

1. Be willing to LISTEN to the faculty member;
2. Avoid the use of the word “you” and try to use “we” instead;
3. Make certain that the faculty member understands the “department’s” position;
4. Make certain that you understand the faculty member’s position;
5. Help resolve the issue..compromise may be needed;
6. Be firm and strong if you need to be without showing anger;
7. Always show respect to your fellow colleagues....listen.

How to Successfully Time Manage

I have found the following tactics extremely helpful in my 28 years as chair:

1. Make task lists and update them regularly;
2. Try to pepper in tasks that are easily done with the more challenging ones;
3. Erase or cross off tasks when completed...(this feels SO good!);
4. Prioritize...a lot;
5. Do LUNCH...get AWAY from your desk;
6. Be willing to spend a day in the office when very little is going on in your area;
7. Check emails OFTEN;
8. DELEGATE;
9. Take vacations away from home if possible.

How can I be Entrepreneurial and why is it vital?

The How:

1. Know your resources or potential resources;
2. Discuss potential new programs or additions to your current one with your SENIOR faculty and dean BEFORE doing a lot of planning;
3. Once you have decided to pursue a new program get admissions, recruiting and the senior management acclimated to the idea;
4. Pitch it to EXISTING studentsand of course do a market analysis;
5. Commit to it and go forward..but remember it may not necessarily be a success;

The Why:

1. We all want to be as academic as possible...but IF a program has low enrollment or is drain on the financial health of the institution it may not survive;
2. In order to be a “player” in the contention for resources you need to be on the lookout for new, innovative courses, majors, minors, certificate programs or graduate programs that are going to be beneficial to the student and be financially successful as well;
3. Being innovative and entrepreneurial (which does in fact often mean being political) does often put YOUR program in the front of the line for resources. Many of us are not happy about this but it is a reality in higher education today.

Discussion and what if scenarios

Scenario:

We are presented with 2 strong candidates for chair from within a department of 20 faculty. The department is very dynamic, entrepreneurial, noted for excellence in teaching, service to the university and scholarship. The department consists of 20 FT faculty of whom 8 are tenured, 6 are on tenure track and 6 are on term contracts. Both candidates are well respected and qualified but the department is split on who to select. Thus the dean and provost must decide.....

Candidate 1

1. 14 year member of department
2. Very good teacher, creative and well respected
3. Good interpersonal skills BUT somewhat reserved
4. Extremely well liked and respected by faculty and administration...but can be easily swayed...NOT political
5. Moderately active in service and committee work
6. Entrepreneurial when needs to be
7. Delegates well and thus appears to manage time well
8. Scholarship is truly outstanding
9. Has a great deal of outside conflicts and obligations (family illness, long commute, works from home 1-2 days a week)

Candidate 2

1. 22 year member of department
2. Excellent teacher (has won many awards)
3. Great interpersonal skills..noted for managing conflict well
4. Respected by faculty and administration but can sometimes appear self-centered and IS political when needed to be
5. Extremely active in service and committee work
6. Entrepreneurial almost to a fault....perhaps TOO much
7. Great Time Manager
8. Scholarship is good but not outstanding
9. Seems to live on campus..can be there days, nights, early mornings, weekends..does this person have a life off campus?

So who would you choose?

I have brought this scenario up in various meetings and conferences of faculty leaders as well as to colleagues of mine who are NOT in academia. I think the findings are interesting.

So what did I discover?

When I brought this to academic leaders exclusively (i.e., department chairs, deans, provosts, and college presidents) everyone chose candidate 2;

When I brought this to a group of mixed faculty and administrators (i.e. faculty who were not chairs or program directors, department chairs, deans and provosts) the result was about 80% in favor of candidate 2, and 20% in favor of candidate 1;

When I brought this to a group of college educated colleagues who were NOT in academia the result was 80% in favor of candidate 1 and 20% in favor of candidate 2.

Although this was by no means a truly scientific measurement, I did find it interesting that as we polled a group with fewer (or no) academic administrators, the shift went from candidate 2 to candidate 1. Amongst the two groups that did contain academic administrators the overwhelming majority preferred candidate 2.

What do I think?

In my opinion the experience and dedication of candidate 2 would outweigh the less “self-centered” personality and better scholarship of candidate 1.....a good chair really needs to put “himself/herself” out there so a little ego might be a good thing!

And by the way, candidate 2 pretty well describes the author of this article.

Conclusion and Closing Thoughts

The chairperson of 2015 is expected to take on many roles. Contention for resources, tightening budgets, and calls for more measurable outcomes as well as competition from competing schools for students all play a large role in deciding where chairs are supposed to spend their time. Couple that with the usual dose of conflict management and teacher-student conflicts (grades, assignments, etc.) we see our roles stretched and stretched well beyond what it was 15 years ago let alone 28 years ago as experienced by me. Time management and delegation become so crucial to our survival and teaching (yes teaching).

My teaching is to me a precious time when I can actually feel like I am doing what I was cut out to do....and that is to help students engage in learning and encourage them through example to discover the myriad of ways in which they can help solve the problems of today and tomorrow. Because after all, isn't that really what college professors want? I leave you with these closing words:

“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 Pinto, 2015