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The DEPARTMENT CHAIR

A RESOURCE FOR ACADEMIC ADMINISTRATORS

INSIDE

A Retrospective View of Department Chairs: Lessons Learned

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Department chairs hold one of the most critical roles in academe and are key to the academic success of their institutions. The development and support of chairs cannot be left to chance, as they can also contribute to mediocrity and failure in colleges and universities (Ruben, De Lisi, and Gigliotti 2017). The time of amateur administration—where faculty play musical chairs, stepping occasionally into the role of department chair—is over (or should be).

Despite the important role chairs play, there is limited research about the position. The department chair is among the least studied and most misunderstood management position in the United States. In fact, one of the most glaring shortcomings in the leadership area is the scarcity of sound research on the training and development of leaders (Gmelch and Buller 2015). With the exception of a few empirically based books in the last few years, the attention chairs receive in the literature is primarily anecdotal. In response, the UCEA Center for the Study of Academic Leadership launched a forty-five-question survey that attempted to collect information related to chairs' motivations, job functions, training, and stress. The survey was sent to 984 department chairs stratified by region, type of institution, and discipline, with a response rate of 31 percent (n = 305 department chairs).

In this article, we provide an overview of the 2016 study of department chairs. The article also includes a retrospective look at a UCEA study of department chairs conducted in 1991 by Gmelch, Burns, Carroll, Harris, and Wentz, offering insight into the ways the chair role has evolved over the past twenty-five years. Both surveys contained similar questions that provide a basis for comparison. This article, the first of six in an ongoing series, will address the following questions: Who are department chairs? Has their profile changed over time? Why do chairs serve? How are they prepared and trained? What causes chairs the greatest stress? Is there life after chairing? And, if they had to do it over, would they serve as chair? These are just some of the questions we delve into in this series of articles.

The Chair's Changing Profile over the Decades

In light of demographic shifts that have taken place in higher education, it is interesting to look at a comparative data set from the perspective of background and personal information. Findings from the data sets in 1991 and 2016 suggest some shifts in background information but not substantive changes. In terms of ethnicity, in the 1991 study, 96 percent of chairs were white, compared with 85 percent in 2016. The number of faculty from nonwhite backgrounds was and continues to be low among chairs. In 1991, 0.9 percent were from Hispanic or Latina/o backgrounds, and in 2016, the number increased to 4 percent. In 1991, 0.2 percent of chairs were African American, compared to 3 percent in 2016. Chairs with Native American backgrounds were 0.2 percent in the 1991 study

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sample and 1 percent in 2016. Chairs with Asian/Pacific backgrounds were 2.6 percent in 1991 and 3 percent in 2016. A review of these findings suggests a homogenous group of chairs in 1991 and in 2016. Gender profiles, however, have changed dramatically. In 1991, the majority of chairs were male (90 percent); in 2016, the majority were female (55 percent). Clearly, there have been shifts in the gender makeup of chairs and in higher education in general in the past twenty-five years.

Additional profile data that shed light on chair changes and shifts in higher education as a whole include changes in rank of chairs. In 1991, 92.5 percent of chairs had tenure (with 80 percent at the full professor level). In 2016, that number had shifted to include 80 percent of chairs with tenure and 59 percent as full professors. This alarming trend is important to note because it indicates that a growing burden is being placed on vulnerable faculty who are still seeking tenure and full promotion. This trend also points to changes taking place in faculty composition.

Why Be a Department Chair?

Given the challenges, complications, and ambiguities of the chair position, why do faculty choose to serve? What are faculty's real motives for accepting the position, and does their motivation affect their willingness to be a leader? The most important reason faculty accepted the challenge to serve remained the same in 2016 as in 1991: to advance either themselves or their departments. They basically accepted the position for intrinsic reasons. Secondarily, faculty felt a need or pressure to serve, since they were *drafted by the dean or out of necessity, as there was no one else to do it.* Does the initial motivation affect the chair's willingness to serve a second term? In 1991, only 25 percent of those motivated by extrinsic reasons (drafted by the dean or no other choice but to accept the position) were willing to serve a second term. In contrast, 75 percent of the chairs motivated by advancing themselves or their departments were willing to serve again. Given the current leadership crisis in higher education, it is critical for department chairs to answer the leadership call to advance themselves and the institution.

Professional identity. When asked about their identity (Do chairs view themselves as faculty, administrator, or both?), it is clear that over time, chairs have grown to view themselves as academics and administrators. As Table 1 demonstrates, an even greater number self-identified their role as both faculty and administration (53 percent in 1991, compared to 70 percent in 2016) and few still identified themselves as strictly "an administrator" (4 percent and 3 percent, respectively).

Preparation and competency as chair. Department chairs typically come to their positions without leadership training, without prior executive experience, without a clear undertaking of the ambiguity and complexity of their roles, without recognition of the metamorphic changes that occur as one transforms from an academic to an academic leader, and without an awareness of the cost to their academic and personal lives. The 2016 study revealed that two thirds of new chairs did not receive any training once they were appointed. Of the 33 percent who did receive training, 40 percent received only one to four hours. Overall, 72 percent of those who received training completed ten hours or less.

Training. What is needed? According to the 1991 study, department chairs testified they needed more training in faculty evaluation, maintaining a conducive work climate, managing external funds, preparing budgets, developing long-range plans, and managing department staff and equipment. When the 2016 chairs were asked what factors would help them feel more competent, they answered similarly with requests for training in budget and finance, conflict resolution, time management, and institutional procedures.

Chair competence. How long does it take to become an expert—that is, competent in your profession? To become an expert takes time: ten thousand hours of practice, as noted by some researchers (e.g., Gladwell 2008). Studies of experts in the corporate world who attain international levels of performance point to the ten-year rule of preparation. The average term of a department chair is four years. Just as chairs start to become competent, they typically return to faculty. Even faculty are granted a seven-year threshold to attain their expertise and become tenured. Forty-one percent of chairs in the 2016 study felt competent by nine months, but 40 percent did not feel competent until the end of the first or second year. Ultimately, 19 percent took longer or did not yet feel competent. However, to the question "How competent do you feel as chair?" 87 percent of respondents identified as feeling highly competent. Among chairs in their first year of service, only 76.9 percent reported feeling confident, whereas the number jumped to 89 percent among respondents who have served from one to three years. Of equal importance is the fact that one out of ten chairs report never feeling highly competent in their roles. Whether we accept the ten-thousand-hour rule, the ten-year rule, or the seven-year faculty rule, why do institutions of higher education assume we can "build" a department chair with a four- to ten-hour seminar?

Table 1. Do Chairs View Themselves as Faculty, Administrators, or Both?

	2016	1991
Faculty	27%	43%
Administrator	3%	4%
Both	70%	53%

Department Chair Stress over Time

What stresses department chairs today? How have stressors changed in the past twenty-five years? When comparing the top department chair stressors from 2016 with similar items from the 1991 study, several observations are worth noting. A top stressor of the 2016 survey (66 percent) was "trying to balance their administrative and scholarly responsibilities." In the 1991 study, the top stressor was "having too heavy a workload," as indicated by 59 percent of the chairs. Workload is still challenging in 2016, with 58 percent indicating high stress.

A second observation is that five job conditions created excessive stress for more than 60 percent of chairs: (1) balancing administration and scholarship (66 percent); (2) maintaining scholarship (64 percent); (3) balancing work-life pressures (64 percent); (4) keeping current in the discipline (63 percent); and (5) email communication (62 percent). As demonstrated in Table 2, these responsibilities indicate a growing source of stress as compared to the 1991 study responses. Are chairs experiencing more stress today than twenty-five years ago? How is this stress shaped by larger contexts?

Third, the nature of the stress seems to be changing. More stress emanates from chairs trying to balance scholarship and leadership as well as work-life balance. Clearly, chairs seem to suffer more from finding balance in their professional and personal lives. Has the nature of the position changed over the decades? Are there significant differences in these trends for men versus women? Does the nature of stress vary by rank, discipline, age, experience, or role identity? These questions will be explored further in subsequent issues of *The Department Chair*.

Final Advice: Top Ten Lessons Learned

To chair or not to chair? For many, there are no easy answers concerning which way to turn. However, when asked in the 2016 study "If you had to do it over again, would you become a department chair?" nine out of ten department chairs (89 percent) answered affirmatively. It is our hope that the research reported here and continued analysis in future issues will help chairs, and those who appoint them, decipher and illuminate the way.

We conclude with some sage advice gleaned from the research findings.

1. Wait until you have been promoted to full professor before you accept the chair position. The trend is alarming: whereas 80 percent of chairs were full professors in 1991, only 59 percent are today.

2. Be careful not to accept the chair position before you are tenured. In 1991, only 7.5 percent accepted the position without being tenured; today, one in five (19.5 percent) faculty serve in an administrative capacity before being tenured, possibly putting their tenure in jeopardy.

3. Accept the position for intrinsic reasons (to advance yourself and your department) *early* enough to keep your options open if you want to move up in university administration.

4. Accept your position *late* enough so you have time to establish your academic credentials and credibility.

5. Because stress from balancing work-life demands plagues 64 percent of department chairs, remember to separate work and nonwork activities so that you can maintain personal and professional balance.

6. Take time to learn the position. Only 41 percent of chairs felt competent after the first nine months, and it took up to two years for another 40 percent to reach their level of competency. Unfortunately, 19 percent took longer or never felt competent in their administrative positions. Becoming a department chair is a journey—a journey many chairs fail to complete.

7. Develop a network of confidants *outside* your department but *inside* your profession for operational guidance and future professional direction.

8. Seek a mentor chair to guide you through the initial white waters of leadership.

9. Consult your significant others and family in your decision, as having children at home to care for adds additional personal stress to the challenges of the job.

10. Create a golden parachute: negotiate an automatic sabbatical to regain currency in your discipline at the end of your administrative term.

A great starting point for chairs as they enter the position is to begin by writing your legacy: How would you want to be remembered by your colleagues? Did you make a difference? Did you leave a legacy? When we surveyed several hundred heads of departments in Australia, three themes emerged from their legacy statements: (1) we advanced our programs; our department is in a better place than before; (2) we advanced people; faculty and staff were promoted; and (3) we did it with decency (Gmelch and Miskin, 2011). If you had to write your legacy today, what would it be? ▲

Table 2. Top Ten Stressors: Percentage of Chairs Reporting Excessive Stress

		2016	1991
1	Balancing administrative and scholarly demands	66%	NA
2	Maintaining scholarly productivity	64%	40%
3	Balancing work-life demands	64%	47%
4	Keeping current	63%	53%
5	Keeping up with email	62%	40%
6	Heavy workload	58%	59%
7	Attending meetings	56%	40%
8	Evaluating faculty	53%	42%
9	Excessive self-expectations	52%	45%
10	Job interfering with personal time	49%	47%

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Working with Professional and Subject Matter Experts in the Classroom: What the Chair Needs to Know

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Should we use the village to help us teach our students? Increasing demands by students, parents, professions, and the federal government to connect degree programs to employability raises the question of whether we should use professionals from the field to help us develop and deliver courses that are more relevant to professional demands. Two recent trends incorporate working professionals into academic classrooms. The first utilizes working professionals to teach courses. These professionals are best at providing real-time information and current industry best practices in a way that many full-time faculty cannot. The second trend utilizes working professionals as subject matter experts in the development of online courses. Both trends support full-time faculty with the most recent workplace developments and professional demands. It is argued that using professionals in these ways will better prepare students for employment, as their information and classroom experiences are more current and connected to the expectations desired by today's employers.

This article explores best practices in incorporating industry professionals into the classroom from traditional and online perspectives. The first part of the article focuses on how to develop positive relationships with working professionals and to provide a mutually beneficial experience among all parties (student, professional, and the department) within the traditional classroom environment. The second part focuses on online delivery of education. This discussion will share the pitfalls and opportunities presented by including subject matter experts in the development of an online course.

Working Professionals in the Traditional Classroom

Drawing on the expertise of industry professionals actively employed in their specific fields is a useful addition to the curriculum in most departments. These individuals, whether guest lecturing or teaching full classes, are able to bring current applications based on immediate workforce experience to the department and classroom. While traditionally not trained as academic researchers or in pedagogy/andragogy, they can provide students with relevant, real-time workplace information in ways many traditional faculty cannot.

Working professionals often support the department chair through name recognition, corporate donor introductions, alumni development, and faculty engagement. They are also able to assist with student employment connections (internship/full time) and potentially grant access to proprietary materials for educational purposes. Most importantly, they can address current workforce applications by teaching cultural and political nuances to students in ways many faculty with limited industry experience cannot.

Working professionals come from any number of sources. Personal contacts, social media sites, former students, faculty leads, office of alumni or experiential education, on-campus career days, trade associations, and cold calls are all ways in which the chair can identify professionals. A surprising number of working professionals may contact the school looking for student engagement opportunities. As chairs interact with workplaces, they should continually scan for opportunities to engage the right individuals with the department.

It is important that the chair properly vet these contacts to ensure they meet the department, faculty, and student needs related to the curriculum. Depending on their use, chairs should consider levels of experience, job titles, companies with which they are associated, academic credentials and certifications, presentation abilities, previous connections with the academic institution, and so forth. The chair must also carefully consider the reason and expected outcome for the working professionals. Are they being hired to teach a course? Then minimum academic credentials may apply. Are they visiting to provide insight to students on a particular job or position? Then the professional's title and job functions may be more important. Whatever the reason, it is best to meet with the professional to discuss expectations and learning objectives prior to having him or her enter a classroom or presentation setting. With a better-prepared professional, students are more likely to have a positive and productive educational experience.

It is also important that chairs develop their working professionals with the same intent they do full-time faculty. Investment up front will often yield better outcomes in the classroom long term. Consider the creation of an instructional development timeline that moves from interest to placement. This timeline should start with meeting the professional to discuss mutual expectations and to share program culture learning outcomes and characteristics of successful classroom teaching. Determine the roles to be filled by the working professional. These roles will vary, and single presentations by these professionals will need far less development and coaching by the chair than a full course.

Because of the fewer demands and less potential for failure, start industry professionals with individual classroom presentations or guest lectures to determine their teaching abilities. Connect the professional with the primary course instructor to ensure that the presentation's content is relevant to the course.