

## ***Suggestions for Making Chair Work More Satisfying and Attractive***

*by N. Douglas Lees*

There are many in higher education who feel that department chairs are the most important administrators in the academy because they work at the nexus of faculty, who deliver the primary institutional products, and upper administrators, who set policy and interface with boards and perhaps political entities. Chairs are the filters through which information moves in both directions and little change is likely unless the chair is on board. Despite its critical function, the chair role has seen increasing responsibilities in recent years and the position itself is becoming less attractive to senior faculty and less satisfying to many of those who now serve as chairs. Clearly, if higher education is to thrive in the new world order, then our most talented individuals must be encouraged to step up to retain and assume key leadership positions.

What are the major drivers that have resulted in many faculty members who tell their chairs "I'm glad I don't have your job!"? All know that personal and professional sacrifices are made in order to accommodate the extra time and energy it takes to manage and lead an academic department. This is particularly true in public research institutions where there are large numbers of underprepared undergraduates and a high student-to-faculty ratio. Those chairing units in such institutions, as opposed to those working in graduate/professional schools, are heavily engaged in work associated with delivering services, improving retention, and raising graduation rates while working with small faculties and staffs. Chairs working in these environments often have little time to do what attracted them to the academy in the first place—teaching and/or research.

The new emphases on retention and graduation rates are elements of the overall accountability movement in higher education. Although it is beyond the scope of this article to list all but learning outcomes assessment, accreditation demands, and a plethora of compliance policies (conflict of interest, human subjects, laboratory safety, confidentiality, etc.), these should be very familiar examples to current chairs. Those who have served for a considerable time will recall when few of these existed. All of these tasks, and others, represent new work for chairs. Thus, we have the convergence of increased responsibilities while further limiting the time available for professional work. This problem has been further exacerbated by the recent fiscal woes that force chairs to accomplish their work with fewer resources of all kinds. Chairs live at the end of the monetary and policy chain, but they are also the responsible faces for delivering quality products—teaching, research, and service. It is no wonder that many become dissatisfied with their positions and others fail to seek them when vacancies arise.

How can we restructure chair responsibilities, provide chairs with ways to keep their hands in the work they really enjoy, and reduce stressful situations that can accumulate to the point of burnout? This article will focus on the expectations that are dealt chairs rather than some of the public and institutional decisions that have led to the present situation.

### **Reducing Workload**

The work expected of chairs has many traditional elements as well as the new responsibilities referred to earlier. As is often the case nothing is taken off the table as new items are added. One way

to alleviate increased time demands is through thoughtful delegation of chair work. There are some tough responsibilities (faculty evaluation, budget decisions, personnel issues) that must remain with the chair but there are others, including degree audits, transfer equivalencies, standard reports (faculty productivity, enrollments, assessment, etc.), data collection, and oversight of outreach activities, that can be delegated to faculty and perhaps even to staff.

The question is who has the time or inclination to do the delegated work? There are several options. The first is a faculty committee. Some departments utilize an executive committee, elected or appointed, as part of its operation. This committee is typically advisory in nature and is not usually a working group. New responsibilities could be added and a new committee, perhaps the administrative committee, could be formed to take on some of these responsibilities. A second option would be individual faculty members. Two possibilities exist. The first is a senior faculty member who wishes a change in responsibilities as the career end nears. This may mean less research or teaching, and such an individual would also be a team player who maintains a desire to contribute. The other possibility is the underproductive faculty member. This is effective in units where differential workloads are possible and where all faculty members are expected to contribute to a one hundred percent level. For those unable to elevate their work to the desired level, the offer of defined work in service may be attractive. In cases of individual faculty contributing in this manner, consideration in merit systems or some other form of recognition/reward would be in order.

The final delegation model is the associate chair. The standard practice is one where this individual is a chair stand-in and does some of the tasks assigned to the chair. A more effective way to look at this is as a developmental exercise. Here, a colleague with an

interest in administration may do this work as an apprenticeship. This developmental form of the model will require that the chair be more selective in the work delegated so that the associate chair can take full credit and use the experience to move into administrative positions.

### **Prioritizing Chair Work**

Another way chairs can reduce workload is by prioritizing those projects that emanate from the department and by making sound decisions in how the department participates in initiatives that come from the school or campus. In prioritization a distinction must be made between what the unit must do versus what it might do. Priorities of order and timing can be set in consultation with faculty. Cautions include avoiding opening too many change initiatives simultaneously (an error made by new administrators far too often), raising issues that are unnecessary and contentious, and failure to regularly monitor and report progress on all projects.

Special consideration must be given to school- and campus-level initiatives that seem to be of unending abundance. Chairs must assess the level of special work the unit can accomplish without compromising its primary functions. With this in mind the chair must assess which campuses and schools are most critical and the ones to which the department can make contributions of impact. These decisions require global analysis and political astuteness on the part of the chair. Once the path is determined the chair must formulate rationales for what it has chosen and what it has left to others. Finally, with the focused plan the department's work must yield excellent results.

### **Personal Health**

Overworked individuals are prone to overlook their personal well-being. This comes in the form of habits that do not promote good health and those that damage important personal rela-

tionships. Missed meals or poor meal substitutes, lack of exercise, lost sleep, and reduction of time for relaxation and fun, including activities with family, are all examples. Some of these can be alleviated by setting firm schedules that block out time for exercise and meals and making the commitment to take time away including vacations just like everyone else. Unfortunately, there are few remedies for losing sleep over difficult problems and relationships at the office.

### **Professional Work**

One of the most important issues that leads to chair discontent is the loss of time for teaching and/or research opportunities that result from the requirements of managing and leading departments. This situation can cause the chair to lose contact with the discipline, fall behind in pedagogical advancements, and fall off the pace in terms of scholarly productivity. These negative outcomes are difficult for many chairs and can have even greater impact if the chair returns to the faculty after several years. Restarting a professional career can be a real challenge.

One way to reduce these negative possibilities is through collaboration. In classroom instruction, one could team-teach with a master teacher who uses timely strategies and classroom techniques. In research, collaboration with a department colleague, someone from another campus unit or even another university, might be a consideration. The chair can have intellectual input—lab meetings, student mentoring, writing proposals and manuscripts—while leaving the day-to-day management responsibilities to the collaborator.

Another possibility for maintaining productivity is to convert the best ideas for accomplishing the work of the chair into forms that can be reviewed and shared or disseminated as are other forms of scholarship or could be eligible for external funding. The caution here is that not all departmental or

institutional cultures will value this type of contribution as a substitute for traditional scholarship.

### **Peer Support**

Remember, chairs are not alone in their work. Others have been doing this for some time and with success. Few problems are truly unique. It is wise to seek a chair mentor or identify and join a chair group on campus. If one does not exist take steps to start one. In addition, although they may lack campus specificity, there are books and periodicals that deal with chair issues as well as conferences that highlight the work of chairs.

### **The Hideaway**

There are times in the lives of chairs that are difficult and stressful. This comes as no surprise to chairs and those around them. Some examples may be discussing budget cuts with the dean or faculty, an annual review with an underperforming faculty member, dealing with serious complaints from students or parents, or simply a high point with regard to deadlines. Such situations call for a break, a brief escape to clear the mind and recharge. Chairs should find a place, or several of them, where they can wander to have a conversation about the issue at hand or something totally unrelated. This can be in the office of a colleague in another department across campus. The important features are that the destination is not announced but does provide a supportive diversion. Just "getting out" for thirty minutes can be therapeutic.

### **Conclusion**

The expanse of chair work continues to grow, creating increased moments of job dissatisfaction among sitting chairs and a disincentive for others to seek such positions. This does not bode well for higher education as it adjusts to the expectations of the future. To alleviate some of the stresses of the position chairs should seek to

delegate more of the routine work and to carefully prioritize which projects and initiatives will be taken on by the department. Chairs should have structured calendars that set aside defined time for proper nutrition, rest, exercise, and private time. Chairs in complex academic environments who need to be creatively engaged in teaching and/or research should consider collaborative arrangements to remain up to date and productive. Chairs should interact with each other in informal ways in order to share best practices

and to mentor new chairs. Finally, chairs should identify a space(s) away from the office where they can escape for a few minutes of diversion when pressure levels rise. ▲

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