

The Administrative Role of the Department Chair

Introduction

The administrative role of the university departmental chair is becoming more demanding and complex. The birth of the academic department chair began in 1825 at the University of Virginia; however it was not until the advent of the land-grant university at Cornell in 1868 that the concept of the department as an organizational unit came into its own.

The chair performs three major roles. These are academic, leadership, and administrative. There is a conclusive body of evidence that the majority of chairs come to their posts with little training or experience in administrative duties. This often translates into job dissatisfaction.

The purpose of this paper is to identify the administrative responsibilities of the department chair, to examine the qualifications for those responsibilities, and to outline recommendations for better preparing the chair to pursue those responsibilities.

Origin

The birth of the academic department in America took place in the early part of the nineteenth century when Thomas Jefferson convinced the University of Virginia's Board of Visitors of the merits of establishing distinct departments of knowledge. In 1825, the University opened with eight schools, each headed by a professor and each offering a program of study.

During the same year, Professor George Ticknor, having been greatly influenced by Jefferson's model, led the move to reorganize Harvard. The reorganization plan called for the establishment of nine departments of instruction, each of which would be governed by a board of full professors. The use of departments appeared also at the University of Vermont in 1826, at Wisconsin in 1836, and at Michigan in 1841.

However, it was not until the advent of the land-grant university at Cornell in 1868, the Harvard administration reforms at 1870, and the founding of graduate schools at Johns Hopkins University and at Clark University in the period 1876 to 1880 that the concept of the department as an organizational unit began to come into its own. The main impetus for this departmentalization movement was for purposes of specialization, graduate organizations, and student-professor relationships. New departments flourished in the 1880's and by 1900 the academic department had become the established unit in all major universities.

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Today the department is the dominant unit in a college or university; it is the major vehicle for faculty involvement in governance; it is the principal part through which the major work of the university is carried out; and it is the focus of the academic career.

The historical development of the position of the department chair and the chair's role is not as clearly documented as the department themselves. It is presumed that the chair's responsibilities originally were purely academic, i.e., to promote the department's discipline and to give guidance to faculty and students within that discipline. The administrative responsibilities of the chair probably were not added until the middle half of this century. It has only been during the last twenty to thirty years that paperwork, government regulations, university policies and procedures, and budget controls have gained such prominence on the campus.

According to the American Council on Education, there are today nearly 80,000 department chairs in American higher education, (Tucker, 1981). Furthermore, one in three faculty members will serve in the post at one time or another, whether trained or not.

The Chair and the Institution

It is evident in the literature that the department chair is highly regarded as a kingpin in the structure of higher education. As early as 1942, Logan Wilson characterized the chair as the "key position" not only in departmental organization but also in institution-wide organization. Eighteen years later, John Corson (1975) voiced similar sentiments and stated that the department chair is probably the key administrative officer of the typical American university.

Central to the functioning of the university is the administrative role of the department chairperson. It is the department chairperson and the quality of leadership at the departmental level that determine the university's effectiveness. What the chairperson does,

or fails to do, to a large extent makes the difference in the accomplishment of the university's basic missions. Erhle (1975) noted that the department chairmanship is one of the most important positions in academe.

Bennett (1972) reported that department chairs are in the trenches of higher education. It is they who provide leadership on the fields of instruction and research. Unless their maneuvers on the field are successful, battles won elsewhere in the institution will not matter much. Perhaps the importance of the chair is best summed up by Tucker (1981). He noted that an institution can run for a long time with an inept president but not long with inept chairpersons.

The Chair's Duties

With these many accolades being cast at the feet of the academic chair, it is ironic that many of the same authors and others describe the chair's job as ambiguous and ill-defined. James Brannin (1972) reported that "the department chair's role is a difficult and ambiguous role, and so ill-defined that at many colleges no description of his duties appears on paper. Often no description of the duties exists or the description is so vague as to be useless or so comprehensive as to be unrealistic. Falk observed that the duties of department chairmen are not clearly defined, and that chairmen, faculty and administrators cannot agree as to what chairmen should do on a daily basis.

In 1981, Bragg conducted a survey of thirty-nine department heads from nine colleges in a major university. More than one-half could not recall any kind of charge given by the dean, and ninety-two percent reported none from the search committee or departmental faculty at the time of appointment. Eighty-two percent reported no orientation of any kind. Most of the department heads were simply provided policy manuals and given instructions to call if they had any questions.

McLaughlin found that chairs are involved in three major roles: academic, leadership, and administrative (McLaughlin, Montgomery, and Malpass 1975). He describes academic duties as those related to student involvement and research activities such as teaching, advising, development of the curriculum, and conducting and encouraging research. McLaughlin's study concluded that chairs feel more comfortable in the role of the academician.

The chair's leadership role involves tasks related to academic personnel, i.g., supporting, developing, motivating, and evaluating faculty members. A major development task is helping the department obtain a high level of professional excellence. This leadership role typically provides a major satisfaction for the chair.

McLaughlin described two major types of administrative duties. The first is comprised of duties with the department such as maintaining records, administering the budget, and managing support staff. The second type of administrative duties relates to the

linkages of the department to other university organizations, primarily central administration. For example, the chair acts as a liaison or conveyor of information to and from the department. The administrative role requires the majority of the chair's time and also contains the least desirable duties as perceived by many chairs.

According to McLaughlin, the three most distasteful tasks which chairs report performing are administrative tasks: maintenance of accurate student records, managing physical facilities and equipment, and preparing and presenting budgets. Although McLaughlin found that chairs derived the least enjoyment from the administrative role, they did recognize the importance of the activities associated with it.

Administrative Duties

Other writers have suggested different classifications of chair's responsibilities, and the total list of duties from all sources is monumental. Authorities generally agree there are 7 major types of administrative duties.

These are:

1. **Planning** - develop, initiate and evaluate departmental programs, plans and goals; listen and encourage ideas to improve the department.

2. **Budgeting** - prepare and submit department budget; administer and account for approved budget including authorizing expenditures for professional travel and development, supplies, equipment, etc; obtain and manage grants, gifts and contracts.

3. **Facilities/Equipment** - manage department facilities and equipment; monitor facility security and maintenance.

4. **Staffing** - assign, supervise and evaluate clerical and technical staff and student help within the department.

5. **Records** - assure the maintenance of accurate departmental and student records.

6. **Advocacy** - interact with the administration in behalf of the department; build and maintain constituency support.

7. **Reporting** - report departmental accomplishments to deans and others.

These are the generally agreed upon administrative duties of the chair.

Administrative Preparation

Few believe that department chairs are adequately prepared or trained for these administrative responsibilities they must assume. John Bennett in his article "Ambiguity in the chairmen's role" (1982) reported that, drawn from the faculty, department chairpersons often have greater scholarly credentials than management experience or skills. He estimated eighty percent of all administrative decisions takes place at a departmental level. Yet most chairpersons are selected for reasons other than demonstrated managerial skills and they rarely receive training. Bennett concluded that the average chair was poorly prepared for the job.

Tucker also noted that most department chairs are drawn from faculty ranks and have had, at best, very little administrative experience. He supported this statement with the results from a survey he conducted. His survey of 400 department chairs in the State University System of Florida found that sixty-eight percent had no prior administrative experience.

McLaughlin conducted a survey of the chairmen of thirty-two state and land-grant institutions. From 1,198 responses he concluded that with the exception of a limited number of chairmen who have professional training in management or administration, chairs typically lack technical management knowledge. The majority of respondents perceived the problem and stated a need for increased proficiency and a need for training in performing their non-academic roles.

The reported lack of preparation is somewhat disconcerting when one considers the importance of the chair's position. It is ironic that higher education which holds such a high regard for properly preparing students for their future social and professional responsibilities has not done the same for those who are called to fill this most important and pivotal role in higher education. Instead, because a large percentage of chairs have not had formal training for their positions, apparently much of academic administration is left to chance.

The concern becomes even more pressing during times of economic constraint in which higher education continues to find itself. A major administrative responsibility of the chair is preparing and administering the department budget and a basic knowledge of budgeting is crucial. Yet, apparently, few chairs have been trained for or even exposed to the activity prior to assuming the position of chief department budgeteer.

Finally the path to the deanship and presidency frequently passes through the chair's office. Thus, by providing inadequate training for the chair, the problem is perpetuated and even magnified as the poorly prepared chair takes on even more significant administrative responsibilities of the dean, provost and president.

A review of job announcements for department chairs or heads in the "Bulletin Board" section of the *Chronicle of Higher Education* was encouraging. The January 16 and February 27, 1985 issues listed twenty such openings. Fourteen of the announcements required applicants to have administrative skills and experience and two stated preference for such skills and experience, while only four make no reference to administrative skills or experience.

The Chair's Satisfaction and Dissatisfactions

Several studies have shown that department chairs receive the least satisfaction from their administrative duties. In his study McLaughlin asked the chairs to rate the five most enjoyable and the five least enjoyable of their duties. Out of a total of twenty-eight duties, six of the seven least enjoyable were administrative duties:

assuring the maintenance of accurate records was rated the least enjoyable followed by managing physical facilities and equipment, preparing and presenting of the proposed budgets, evaluating faculty performance, to determine tenure and raises, managing of the clerical and technical staff, and administering the departmental budget and other financial resources.

Heimler (1976) identified nine reasons why chairs resign their positions to return to full-time teaching. It is interesting to note that seven of the nine are related to their administrative duties.

1. A dislike of the administrative details and clerical tasks associated with the position.

2. The lack of an administrative frame of reference, i.e., he finds the administrative tasks and leadership responsibilities of the chairmanship to be out of harmony and incompatible with his basic values, self-concept, and academic commitments.

3. The low status that administration has on campus relative to teaching, research and scholarship.

4. The frustrations associated with the administration of a department through existing personnel procedures.

5. The lack of administrative time and assistance to handle the position in accordance with the expectations of the chairman himself and of the departmental staff.

6. Heavy administrative responsibilities without commensurate authority in the decision-making process.

7. The belief that there is no future in college administration.

Despite their dislike for administrative activities, Bennett found that more than eighty percent of the chairmen he queried indicated much satisfaction in the job and would serve another term if requested. Among the reasons cited were the following: opportunity to exercise influence over the departmental mission and curriculum direction; instituting new programs; being able to support individuals who had contributed significantly to departmental or institutional activities and objectives; and the continuing need for a challenge beyond the familiar responsibilities of teaching and research.

Summary and Implications

What can the university administration do to better prepare chairs for their administrative responsibilities and to make those duties more satisfying? First, a clear and consistent understanding of expectations should be presented to all candidates for the position of chair during the selection process. A detailed and accurate written job description should be given to each prospect. The description should include but expand any formal statement of duties such as that in the faculty manual.

Once selected, the administration of the university should provide orientation for the new chair. The orientation program could be led by current and for-

mer chairs and should include familiarizing the chair with the rules, regulations, policies and procedures of the university. In addition to academic responsibilities, the program should deal with administrative activities expected of the chair including such tasks as developing and managing a budget, managing the facilities and equipment, and assigning work responsibilities.

Assessments of chairmen management training needs must be conducted on a periodic and timely basis. This can provide one of the means upon which to design and implement training programs. Such a survey was conducted by Waud and Trail of 39 Cooperative Extension chairs at Washington State University 1981. Major management needs identified were: developing and managing budgets, evaluating faculty, preparing and disseminating reports, evaluating program effectiveness in relation to program goals and objectives, assisting faculty in developing programs, and resolving conflict. A three year training plan based on the needs assessment was implemented and carried out.

The university should compile a handbook to be given to all chairs. A good example is the *Handbook for the Administration of Academic Departments* developed at Colorado State University. Major topics include: departmental organizations, faculty personnel matters, staff personnel matters, fiscal operations, and research administration.

Periodic on-campus workshops on timely topics should be offered to new and experienced chairs. There are a number of books especially prepared for workshop development and use. These include *Administrative Development in Higher Education* by John B. Bennett. The latter contains numerous case studies about the role of the chair.

There are national workshops and seminars offered by higher education organizations such as the Modern Language Association and the American Council on Education's Departmental Leadership Institute. These and similar workshops are frequently advertised in scholarly journals and the *Chronicle of Higher Education*.

In addition to formal workshops, administration should encourage periodic informal gatherings where chairs can share their common concerns. A Washington State University chair recently commented that chairs perceive themselves to be very isolated because they are neither faculty nor administrators, and they have very little interaction among themselves. Such informal meetings could give the chairs the feeling that they are part of a community of faculty-administrators.

Finally, there are several books which chairs can study about their job activities. They include *Academic Departments* by Dean E. McHenry and Associates; *A Departmental Chairperson's Survival Manual* by Gregory A. Kimble; *The Academic Department of Division Chairman: A Complex Role*, James Brann and

Thomas Emmet, editors; and *Chairing the Academic Department: Leadership Among Peers* by Allen Tucker. The latter book includes such helpful chapters as department accomplishments and aspirations, setting goals and developing action plans, the budget cycle, preparing department budget requests, persuading the dean, and managing department resources: time, people, and money.

There is also an excellent booklet available from the American Association for Higher Education by David B. Booth entitled *The Department Chair: Professional Development and Role Conflict*. In addition to the general content of the book, Booth provides a list of available films, simulations, games and case studies and an extensive bibliography.

It is incumbent upon the university administration to realize how essential departments and their chairs are to the well-being of the total institution. The administration must make available to chairs the training and resources necessary for the proper discharge of their duties. Along with the training and resources, chairs must be convinced that their seemingly mundane administrative chores are in reality the lifeblood of the institution.

In conclusion, a statement by Jennerich appears to be appropriate. He notes that the future development of American colleges and universities depends, in large measure, upon the successes or failures of academic departments in providing quality educational programs. At the heart of the department lies the chair. We simply cannot afford to ignore the importance of that position.

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Needed: Coursework Addressing Agricultural Stress

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Stress in the agricultural sector has skyrocketed in the past few years (Magnuson, 1985). The Rural Concern telephone hotline in Iowa received 451 calls the first week of operation. Most of these calls focused on financial problems and were stress-related (Extension Mobilizes," 1985). A similar confidential farm-financial counseling service, operated by the University of Illinois Cooperative Extension Service, had more than 300 calls in the first ten days of operation. At least 80% of the callers were referred to counselors for in-depth consultation including county extension advisers specializing in farm-financial and family counseling. ("Farmers Welcome Rural Route," 1985).

Farmers are not only losing jobs, but also losing land that may have been in their families for generations. Losing a farm often means losing a way-of-life — perhaps the only lifestyle known for generations. Desperate straits are not necessarily reserved for "poor managers" or "bad" farmers. Many were quite aggressive in their expansion efforts during the days of lower interest rates and rising land prices. However, these same farmers today have a higher debt-to-asset ratio than crop prices will support.

USDA figures show that financial stress, ranging from insolvency to extreme cash flow problems, is being experienced by 93,000 of the nation's mid-size farms ("Financial Stress," 1985). The March 1984 Crop and Livestock Reporting Service Survey reported that 11,000 farm operators, in Iowa alone, may have to leave farming because of financial pressures during the 1984-85 fiscal year.

The effects of this financial stress are spilling over into the farm credit systems and commercial banks. The USDA reports that commercial banks, which hold nearly 20% of all farm debt, have had sharp increases in delinquencies and loan losses. The entire pipeline of resources is affected. In early 1985, farm machinery sold at 50 to 75% of the actual retail price (Matthews, 1985). Extension of credit became the number one problem for fertilizer and chemical dealers tied 100% to the farmer. Implement, fertilizer, and chemical dealers are all asking for credit reference from farmers who have done business with these dealers for years.

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If the present farm situation continues, between five and seven percent of the remaining farmers will discontinue their operation during each of the next three to five years. The demise of this once seemingly healthy agricultural economic base will affect the over 21 million jobs throughout the economy that exist because of the resources needed and commodities produced by farmers. Those involved in counseling distraught farmers have noticed an increase in social problems such as alcoholism, increased divorce rates, increased suicide or threats of suicide and child abuse. Where financial stress exists, social stress appears to rise (Magnuson, 1985).

Financial problems are always coupled with personal changes and, usually, tremendous personal problems. Change becomes a certainty in a family's life cycle. During these uncertain economic times, this change and uncertainty are faced daily by many farm families. While change itself is not bad, negative financial change can threaten the health, well-being and very existence of a family.

Certainly the kinds of changes demanded of farm families facing foreclosure or tight financial situations brings on a series of undesirable changes in employment, home and lifestyle, not to mention the change in self-esteem, peers, and social status. It can be documented that the amount of stress experienced as a result of change is influenced by the number of stressful events occurring; the accumulation of many changes over time takes its toll emotionally and physically on all family members (Robinson, 1982).

Most farm families have neither faced nor have even been willing to contemplate the sorts of problems brought on by current economic conditions. Many students majoring in agriculture come from a farm background; like their parents, they may not be aware of the effects of stress on themselves nor know how to help others deal with these stressors. Other students who have not been reared on the farm simply may not be sensitive to the many pressures facing those in agriculture today. Hence, a course or seminar addressing this topic, "Stress in Today's Agriculture," would be appropriate in today's agricultural curriculum.

Such a course might address the following topics:

— How stress affects lifestyle and behavior — physically, mentally, and emotionally.

— Improvement of stress management skills — coping skills to manage personal, family and work stress without marital discord, alcohol or drug abuse,