Leadership Excellence: Constructing the Role of Department

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Leadership Excellence: Constructing the Role of Department

Background and Literature Review

A quick scan of the *Chronicle of Higher Education* and the headline jumped out, “I Used to Run a Department, but Then I Got Wise” (Davis, 2002). The article was worth reading because the author confronted the important questions many chairs ask: “What is my real job?” and “Am I in the right job?” Some decide that administration is not a suitable option while others embrace the leadership experience of the chair role.

The role of department chair in today’s colleges and universities is much different and more multifaceted than it was just a decade ago. Academic department chairs must conduct performance reviews, oversee budgets, carry out strategic planning, and negotiate their department’s identity within highly complex institutions (Hecht, Higgerson, Gmelch, & Tucker, 1999). Evidence gathered from ACE workshops indicated that as many as two-thirds of the chairs had no prior administrative experience and yet they face a demanding role requiring a wide range of talents (Hecht, Higgerson, Gmelch, & Tucker, 1999).

Chairs are charged with leading both programs and faculty. They are often perceived as intermediaries between deans and faculty. In an extensive list of responsibilities, Creswell, Wheeler, Seagren, Egly, and Beyer (1990) explicated 97 activities while Tucker (1992) pared this list to 54 different duties. Carroll and Gmelch (1994) organized 26 tasks into the four overarching categories of leader, scholar, faculty developer, and manager. Lucas (1994) divided chair tasks into leadership responsibilities and administrative functions but subdivided these to reflect the complexity of each task. Wolverton, Gmelch, Wolverton, and Sarros (1999) described multiple dimensions including administrative, resource management, leadership, personal scholarship, external liaison, resource development, and faculty development responsibilities. This literature suggests that chair roles are broadly defined with some difference in emphasis placed on the importance of particular tasks that chairs must accomplish in their roles.

Even with this cursory review, it is clear that the chair role requires individuals to fulfill many responsibilities and that these rely on a different skill set than the one that originally attracted them to the independent life of the scholar. Furthermore, in many cases chairs report that no one explained what was expected of them in this position. They define their role by their previous experiences or by observing what other chairs do (Creswell, Wheeler, Seagreen, Egly, & Beyer, 1990). Chairs are often uncertain about their roles and construct the definition of their role as enacted on the job.
Method

To understand how chairs perceive their role, we conducted 13 qualitative interviews with academic department chairs in a four-campus university system (38% of the chairs represent the Columbia campus; 31% Rolla; 23% St. Louis; 8% Kansas City) as part of a larger study involving interviews with 28 department chairs. We identified “successful department chairs” by asking prominent department chairs and deans to identify the chairs they perceived as successful and to explain why they identified these particular chairs on their campus. We contacted these chairs and asked them to participate in the study.

Chairs were interviewed in their campus offices. Interviews lasted from 45 minutes to 1-½ hours and were recorded. We began by collecting background information (e.g., number of years as chair, previous administrative experience) and then asked fourteen open-ended questions about chair roles and responsibilities (e.g., What are the primary duties and responsibilities of being chair in your department? Describe how you spend your time and what gets your attention during an average week. Describe your most exhilarating experience as chair and explain why it was exhilarating).

Interviewees had been chair for an average of 3.6 years with a range of 1-7 years (years as interim chair were not included in these calculations). Most were internal candidates (85%) and held the rank of professor (85%). Chairs varied in prior administrative experience: 46% had prior academic administrative academic experience; 23% had administrative experience from other field; 31% had no prior experience. The departments these chairs were responsible for were classified as professional (31%), engineering (31%), social sciences (15%), arts & humanities (15%), and education (8%). The average size of the departments (as indicated by tenure-track faculty lines) was 15.38. Department size ranged from 5-30 members. Male chairs represent 85% and female chairs represent 15% of those interviewed.

Recordings were transcribed and the interviews were analyzed for repeated themes. Using the constant comparison method, conceptual categories were derived from the interviews. Segments from interviews were coded into these categories through a process of comparison with other instances assigned to that category and contrast with instances assigned to other categories (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The numbers after the excerpts from interviews reference the interview and page number. The number in the brackets in the table and at the end of a section indicates the number of times that theme occurred in the interviews.

Findings

The four major roles chairs described are administrative, leadership, interpersonal, and resource development and each of these can be further subdivided (see Table 1). The ADMINISTRATIVE role includes four specific roles with responsibilities that can be managed through careful attention to details.
Table 1. Chair Roles

**Administrative roles**

- Fiscal overseer [16]
- Schedule coordinator [12]
- Report generator [15]
- Staff supervisor [3]

**Leadership roles**

- Visionary [28]
- Internal advocate [26]
- Internal intermediary [6]
- External liaison [22]
- Curriculum leader [15]
- Role model [24]

**Interpersonal roles**

- Counselor [13]
- Coach [18]
- Mediator [16]
- Climate regulator [13]

**Resource development roles**

- Faculty recruiter [16]
- Faculty mentor [17]
- Faculty evaluator [9]
- Resource warrior [22]

The fiscal overseer role includes budget responsibilities. Chairs are in charge of monitoring their
budgets and insuring that they do not overspend their allocations. “Obviously, watching the budget is a really big function, to make sure you don’t get the department into financial distress.” (19,8) Some chairs also described this role as finding creative ways to extend their budgets and others took on active fund raising roles to supplement their departmental budgets. [16]

As the schedule coordinator, chairs schedule courses, times, rooms, and professors each term. They make the decision about different teaching loads and are accountable when students need courses to graduate in a timely manner and courses must be delivered. “Certain times of the year you’re concerned with scheduling the allocated faculty to courses.” (18, 24) [12]

Chairs complain about the responsibilities accompanying the role of report generator. They perceive that the number of reports have increased, making it difficult to accomplish other roles. “Then there is a significant amount of time just spent on the paper work because even in the five years I was the chair there were more and more and more reports and various things of that sort that were required earlier and earlier. And it really was—it’s a huge burden. There’s a big turnover this year in chairs in the college and there’s a lot of factors, but I think it’s a hell of a lot of paper work.” (9, 10) [15]

Chairs are staff supervisors. “Q: What are the additional administrative kinds of tasks that you do as chair that you didn’t have as a faculty member? A: Yeah, so those are supervising the office staff . . . I think what takes the largest amount of time that I didn’t anticipate was dealing with personnel problems. (16, 4) This requires the chair to be familiar with procedural details regarding staff benefits (e.g., sick leave, vacation policies, staff evaluations for raises). [3]

The six LEADERSHIP roles demonstrate diverse responsibilities but are integrated by working toward improving the department and an abiding belief in the future of the department.

The visionary is the planner and dreamer leading the department into the future. The visionary is a transformational leader (Waldman & Bass, 1990), a change agent capable of creating a space for change and generating consensus among the faculty. Chairs who saw themselves as visionaries contrasted their styles with “care-taker” chairs. They accepted the role with the expectation that making changes would be an exciting challenge. A chair described the role as one that placed the department and herself at the cutting edge: “I’m not a comfortable maintainer, that’s not my thing. I like to be cutting edge. I like to be out there on the front. I like to be a visionary. And you don’t do that if you’re doing what everyone else is doing.” (1, 2) A visionary moves out in front of the pack. [28]

The responsibilities of the internal advocate role are to represent, promote, and support the faculty and department to relevant internal audiences. The most salient internal audiences for advocacy efforts include the Dean’s Office and other administrators. In describing his efforts to represent faculty to the Dean, one chair described his advocacy role: “It’s my job to let him know how things look at the department level. It’s communicating our situation and also advocating for
Chairs find themselves playing a delicate intermediary role between the Dean and faculty in the department. Chairs must maintain their relationships with the dean and faculty. They find themselves advocating for faculty and explaining the dean’s actions: “You have a dual responsibility. There are always unpleasant pieces of news that one has to take to one’s colleagues, then on the other hand, you know, the next step on the ladder on campus is the dean.” (8,4) The intermediary role creates some tension because the chair role is perceived as having both administrative and faculty obligations. [6]

The external liaison establishes relationships with external audiences to the university in order to advance the department. In interviews with chairs, the external audiences mentioned most frequently were alumni, potential employers for students, potential students and high schools (for student recruitment), the community, granting agencies, and donors. Alumni are one of the external audiences that chairs work to build relationships with in their role as an external liaison: “I think another facet to my job is alumni relations and bridging—building bridges and maintaining them between the school and alumni.” (1, 1) Establishing these connections with audiences outside of the university community and advocating the mission of the department is a way for chairs to advance the vision of the department. [22]

As the curriculum leader, the chair takes a leadership role with respect to the curriculum in the department. Revision, planning, updating, and implementation of changes in undergraduate and graduate programs must be a recurrent process and monitored by the chair. In this example, the chair takes on the role of encouraging the faculty to work on curriculum development: “Part of my task is curriculum. I am helping to lead the faculty in curriculum development and program redesign” (3, 3) [15]

While the literature has identified the role of scholar for chairs, we chose the broader role of role model to clearly situate chairs as role models in both teaching and research. The following excerpt makes the connection to role-modeling quite explicit. “In essence it means that I am responsible for everything. So that means it reduces to the primary priorities of our department which are teaching professional students, teaching graduate students and being productive scholars which for scientists means doing research, and the approach of the previous dean and our current dean is that the chair should lead primarily by example” (16, 3) If chairs expect their faculty to excel as teachers and researchers then they think they should lead by example. [24]

The four interpersonal roles are based on developing productive relationships between individuals in the workplace.
The counselor listens and gives advice. The counselor role involves being accessible, establishing relationships, and being willing to listen to concerns. Some chairs saw their counseling roles as dispensers of information to fix problems: “I think some of them [faculty] think I can solve anything while others have a little more of a distinct view that there are some things that I can’t solve. I will say that having done a lot of—I mean—it’s not only that I’ve had administrative experience; I’ve chaired all of the most important committees on campus except one. And I pretty much know who to call. And so when there’s a problem some of my colleagues think whatever it is that somehow I can magically make it go away. And most of the time I can.” (8, 3) Chairs noticed that some faculty members required more of their time as a counselor than others. [13]

The coach encourages, motivates, and inspires faculty, staff, and students to greater levels of excellence. “Well coaching is an important part of being, you know, of the manager, and a coaching is a very, is a fairly intense interpersonal experience, and I think that is important. That is what we need.” (17, 9) Chairs were most concerned about motivating their faculty to be successful researchers and to obtain externally funded research. [18]

The mediator deals with difficult people (Leaming, 1998). In this role, the chair hears and attempts to resolve complaints from faculty, staff, students, parents, and administrators: “We don’t have a complaints box, but they just stand in line. You know how it goes. Students and faculty and staff.” (12, 2) Interpersonal conflict negotiation and problem solving skills are useful in this role and some chairs express surprise at the pettiness of faculty complaints. [16]

The climate regulator establishes a working environment conducive to accomplishing the goals of the group: “You have to be able to seek out satisfaction from knowing that you have created an environment that people can thrive in” (15, 16) It is clear from the interviews that this culture takes varied forms but the dominant theme is to create an environment that will encourage faculty productivity. “You’ve got to create an environment that encourages productivity. You’ve got to give them [faculty] freedom and set up important systems, encourage them, take the frustrations out of their way.” (18, 4-5) [13]

RESOURCE DEVELOPMENT roles are defined broadly to include faculty as resources and the four roles focus on increasing assets to advance the department.

The chair plays a primary role as a faculty recruiter in the process of hiring new department faculty even when there is a search committee. “I’m spending a lot of my time on faculty recruitment. And I should be.” (12, 14) New hires are instrumental to accomplishing the chair’s vision and can influence the climate of the department. [16]

The faculty mentor role consists of providing professional development opportunities, answering questions and providing advice and information to insure professional success and faculty retention (Creswell & Brown, 1992). Chairs take assistant professors under their wings. For one chair, this means making sure that new hires get the information they need to stay on track: “I take
it as a role that—to make sure that our new hires stay on track. That’s not really anywhere in the written document but it’s really easy for assistant professors to get off track. Inform them of stuff. I do quite a bit of that.” (7, 2) [17]

Chairs describe their role as evaluators of their faculty. Some chairs experience tension between their mentor and evaluator roles and some acknowledge that it is difficult to provide evaluations because they must be adapted to the individual. Evaluations are completed for annual merit raises. Promotion and tenure evaluations are another facet of faculty evaluations and one chair provides a glimpse into the importance of this role: “I have to write tenure recommendations. I mean that’s a time consuming job that has to be done extremely well. The good tenure dossier is one that no questions are asked about.” (8, 7) [9]

In the role of resource warrior, the chair takes on the responsibility of finding the resources that the faculty need to do their jobs: “You’ve got to provide resources and this is time and dollars so the faculty can succeed.” (18, 3) The chair’s goal is to remove obstacles from the path of productive faculty members so the department and faculty can reach its potential. “I really feel that any administrator’s job, and I am so as a chair, my primary job was to make sure that the only limit to the productivity of the faculty was their own creativity, enthusiasm and willingness to do things. I was going to make sure there were no obstacles in their way. No committee assignments, nothing that would block them from achieving what their dreams were.” (15, 10) The warrior metaphor is chosen purposefully because chairs wage never-ending battles for increasingly scarce resources (e.g., money, space, staff, equipment, and time). [22]

We also asked chairs to reflect on their most exhilarating experiences in their tenure as chair and to provide an explanation for why they found the experience stimulating. Then we used the chair roles we had generated to classify these experiences. We found that chairs were describing themselves enacting roles relating to resource development in 44% of the instances, 33% involved leadership roles, 16% were displays of interpersonal roles, and 7% required an other classification (See Table 2).

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<th>Table 2. Roles and Perceptions of Experiences</th>
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Enacting resource development roles was the most prominent of the exhilarating experiences. Chairs were particularly excited about faculty recruitment efforts when they had been able to aggressively recruit strong faculty members for their team when previous efforts have been unsuccessful: “Q: What about the most exhilarating experience as chair? A: That’s a good one. We hired an endowed chair position. Which we had not gotten the quality of applicant that we had wanted. We had run the search once or twice before. And without success. I heard a rumor about this guy who might be interested. And I jumped on it and I just actively recruited this guy and he’s now joined us. And we would be up a creek if we had not gotten him. And he’s just a world recognized guy. When I first heard the rumor I thought there’s no way that guy is going to move here. He’s established where he is. I went after him pretty aggressively and it really paid off.” (12, 12) Chairs also get excited when they have successfully mentored faculty even when faculty may not realize how important the mentoring has been to his/her success: “I do enjoy helping highly motivated, talented individuals attain success, and I think I understand the system for doing that in my discipline well enough that I am still effective at helping them. Now the reason that I said that is not always as gratifying as that sounds, is that if you do that really well, they don’t realize that you helped. They think they did it.” (16, 12) Chairs are elated when they are able to deliver the resources that their faculty and students need: “It was very exhilarating to attend a conference with a new faculty member who had attracted a diverse group of students, and for whom we had gotten the necessary equipment, which we didn’t have previously. And to see all that come together—that was very exhilarating.” (9, 13) When faculty and students are successful, the department is productive and the chair feels successful.

Leadership roles also figure prominently in the experiences that chairs identify as exhilarating but over half of these incidents can be categorized as enactments of the visionary role. Chairs liked the challenge of identifying where changes needed to be made and then moving the department in the direction where improvements could be made. In this first example, a chair is also acting as disciplinary academic officer in making curriculum changes but the changes are exciting because they happen quickly and they are part of this chair’s effort to remain cutting edge. “The discussion was basically to revamp the curriculum. It was exciting and we did it really in two years. We started from scratch and got it done in two years. Surging it forward. That was exciting.” (1,

The interpersonal roles that are mentioned are as coach and climate regulator. “I think one of the most exhilarating experiences was the day when we talked about our vision and we talked about who we wanted to bring on board. Then we broke into groups and did story, song, and whatever. And people were dancing. I think I sat back that day and thought, you know, this group
has come together. There are neat people on this faculty. This is—we are a community of scholars. We have a goal. And I think people have bought into wanting the very best. I think they’ve decided this is a good thing. And just the camaraderie. The way people spoke out and felt comfortable about doing it. Because of what it symbolized for me—that even symbolized that I had done one thing that I had set out to do and that was to bring that group together as a community.” (3, 17) This chair successfully changed the climate despite difficulty.

To summarize, exhilarating experiences seem to have certain qualities: 1) there is a felt need and a clear improvement as a result, 2) they are difficult challenges, 3) there is an expectation of failure that is overcome, 4) others benefit from the action, 5) the task is accomplished quickly.

Finally, we asked chairs to reflect on frustrating experiences and to account for why these experiences were particularly difficult. When we coded these experiences by roles, 42% were related to resource development, 25% to leadership, 17% to interpersonal, 12% to administrative, and 4% were other roles (See Table 2).

Resource development roles contributed to the most frustrating experiences for chairs and these often involved being thwarted from obtaining resources or faculty recruiting. Some chairs were exasperated that they were expected to keep departments running with few resources and little hope for additional resources: “I could speak more specifically about the problems that are really frustrating for me with the department. With this particular department is that we’re understaffed. That we don’t have the faculty that we need to run the programs that we have. A simple comparison would show that we’re understaffed.” (13, 11) Other chairs were frustrated by the false promise of additional resources and the administrative hurdles that made obtaining resources impossible: “What was really frustrating over the last couple of years is just simply trying to get the administration to let me spend the money on what it was let for. We actually didn’t spend it all, you know, we lost a lot of it. The chancellor waited until April to clear the position we hired this year. So we lost it—we had money in there for another assistant professor and for a secretary, but it just got lost. Because people drag their feet. There’s a lot of indecision here about the important things and a lot of rapid decisions about unimportant things.” (7, 20) What made this particularly frustrating for this chair was that he had been successful in hiring several strong candidates in the last several years and expected continued success.

In the leadership role, chairs were frustrated when their attempts to be visionary were thwarted or delayed by others lack of cooperation: “So I was trying to affect change where people didn’t necessarily want to change, and so I think that was kind of a frustrating part. You know, things, some things got done, but basically, it took a lot more effort than I had envisioned it would.” (14, 11) “Not getting an important proposal through the campus several years ago (was the most frustrating experience). Beyond a doubt. It got caught in a campus political buzz saw. That certainly is my biggest frustration.” (8, 9) This was frustrating because the chair perceived delaying maneuvers and political agendas had frustrated his vision for the department. Chairs also were
disturbed when their efforts to advocate for their departments were unsuccessful. They were also dissatisfied when the demands on their time kept them from serving as a positive research role model.

The most prominent among the frustrating experiences in interpersonal roles were failed attempts at mediating conflicts. “Our retired emeritus faculty caused great irritation with our staff. They didn’t want voice mail. We have two secretaries for about 10-12 faculty but we have one retired faculty member who wants a secretary to spend her time answering his phone. And it really irritates her when she’s trying to do end of the month accounting stuff. And he gets lots of personal calls. But he’s not one of these guys that you can—he’s quite—he’s got a temper. So a couple of times, we bit the bullet and went face to face with him. He almost had a heart attack screaming at us.” (12, 11) The chair is caught between the staff and a retired faculty member. His attempts to compromise and confront have not been effective. Other interpersonal experiences included unsuccessful attempts to coach and regulate the climate when faculty members were unwilling to be motivated or persuaded to change the culture.

It is not surprising that administrative roles account for frustrating experiences represent the report generator role exclusively. “I think that the tendency, and this university seems to be suffering from that, is for there to be too much management and not enough leadership. So that the important thing that a chair does is leadership and mentoring, and player-coach kind of modeling. The less important things, but the things that get emphasized are management, paperwork, gobbledy-gook that takes and unbelievable amount of time, and it seems that every time there is a new administrator at a higher level that is trying to do something good, it results in another layer of paperwork that if you never did it, it’s not apparent it would ever matter, except you start getting nasty e-mails if you don’t do it. So I don’t care for that stuff.” (16, 12-13)

To summarize some recurrent themes across these roles, frustrations seem to evolve from 1) expectations of success based on prior experiences, 2) expectations of success based on what becomes false promises, 3) delays, 4) decision making based on misinformation, no information, or political agendas, 5) increasing expectations that chairs should manage details, 6) scarce resources, 7) difficult people, tensions between the chair and faculty role.

Implications and Practical Recommendations

- Chairs should establish a “chair support group” that meets monthly to network and mentor colleagues.
- Less experienced chairs should deliberately seek out more experienced chairs as mentors. Experienced chairs should offer their guidance.
- Chairs can sustain their own desire for change in a department by fostering the development of other “change agents” in the department to assist in these efforts.
Formal leadership training opportunities should be directed toward chairs (e.g., President’s Leadership Program). Feedback intensive programs (e.g., 360-degree assessment) and those that allow chairs to share common methods for solving problems would be particularly helpful. Chair roles are complex and no single individual can be skilled at all of the roles.

Chairs should have coffee, take faculty members to lunch, walk around the building, sit in the lounge–do whatever it takes to establish informal lines of communication with faculty members in the department. Many of the difficult interpersonal issues become easier to resolve once you work on your own communication.

Chairs should get a name stamp and a trusted associate chair. They should delegate so they can spend time on the important tasks. Satisfied chairs took time for their own research. They were also more likely to mentor their faculty.

The practice of rotating department chairs every three to four years should be eliminated. Department chairs operate in a highly complex environment that is increasing more legalistic in nature. They oversee multi-million dollar budgets – including money obtained from state and federal grants. Furthermore, they are asked to provide leadership for highly skilled faculty and staff members who are the campus’ most valuable resources. To routinely leave the job to inexperienced administrators raises questions about whether or not universities are using their resources in the most efficient manner.

References


