



Department Chair Online Resource Center

Roles and Responsibilities of Department Chairs

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ROLES, CONTEXT, AND TRANSFORMATIONS

The Role of the Department Chair

The changing context of higher education described in the previous chapter sets the stage for our review of the department chair's roles and responsibilities. As front-line managers, department chairs serve more than one constituency, a fact that requires department chairs to assume multiple roles. Chairs are the primary spokespersons for department faculty, staff, and students. At the same time, institutions of higher education have an increasing reliance upon department chairs to implement and carry out campus policy and the mission of the institution for the central administration. Chairs represent the central administration to department members at the same time that they articulate the needs of the department members to the administration. Consequently, department chairs are the essential link between the administration and department members. When chairs fulfill their role effectively, there is good communication between the administration and faculty. When chairs do not succeed in this task, there is often a lack of trust between the administration and the faculty because neither constituency understands either the needs or perspectives of the other. Department chairs must do more than forward information between the administration and department members. Chairs must interpret and present information and arguments that accurately reflect the intent of each constituency to the other for the overall purpose of advancing the institutional mission by connecting department objectives with that broader mission.

At one time, the chair position was reserved for the most prestigious scholars within the discipline. These chairs presided over departments in an almost ceremonial manner, and did not wrestle with budget cuts, declining enrollments, productivity reports, accountability measures, fund raising, or changing technology. While many institutions still stipulate that department chairs have a record of scholarship and publication, all institutions expect chairs to be more than a role model or figurehead. Department faculty seek a strong advocate, a consensus builder, a budget wizard, and a superb manager. Academic deans and provosts seek department chairs who have superb managerial and communication skills, and are able to implement university policies and directives.

One distinctive characteristic of the chair's role is its paradoxical nature. Department chairs are leaders, yet are seldom given the scepter of undisputed authority. Department chairs are first among equals, but any strong coalition of those equals can severely restrict the chairs' ability to lead. Deans

and vice presidents look to chairs as those primarily responsible for shaping the department's future, yet faculty members regard themselves as the primary agents of change in department policies and procedures. Department chairs are both managers and faculty colleagues, advisors and advisees, soldiers and captains, drudges and bosses.

Department chairs are the only academic managers who must live with their decisions every day. The dean and the vice president make many important administrative decisions, such as which colleges or departments will get the lion's share of the year's operating budget. The dean and the vice president, however, do not have to say good morning—every morning—to their colleagues in the department; they do not have to teach several times a week alongside their colleagues; they do not have to maintain a family relationship with their faculty members. The department chair, on the other hand, must be acutely aware of the vital statistics of each family member including births, deaths, marriages, divorces, illnesses, and even private financial woes. This intimate relationship is not duplicated anywhere else on the campus because no other academic unit takes on the ambiance of a family, with its personal interaction, its daily sharing of common goals and interests, and its concern for each member. No matter how large the department, no matter how deeply divided over pedagogical and philosophical issues it may be, its members are bound together in many ways: They have all had the same general preparation in graduate school; their fortunes generally rise or fall with the fortunes of the discipline to which they all belong; and they share the same value system of their profession. Working alongside the members of this "family" is the chair, a manager who is sometimes managed, a leader who is sometimes led, a parent who continually strives to keep peace for the sake of mutual benefit and progress.

These conditions are not the only ones that make the department chair's role paradoxical. The chair must deal with the expectations and desires of the students in the department, the personal and professional hopes and fears of the faculty, the goals and priorities of the college dean, the often perplexing priorities of the central administration, the sometimes naive and sometimes jaundiced views of the alumni, and the bureaucratic procedures of accrediting agencies. Few administrators can, by themselves, face these conflicting constituencies and find solutions to all problems. Yet the department chair must induce these constituencies to work together to help solve the problems they themselves generate.

Today the internal paradox of the chair's role is further complicated by external pressures. The central administration, professional accrediting agencies, state boards of higher education, and

granting agencies are just some of the external publics that department chairs must understand and address. The demands of these multiple constituencies impact individual departments as much as they do institutions. A state board of higher education, for example, may decide to review the relative merit and quality of programs within the same discipline offered at different institutions throughout the state. In such instances, a department finds itself virtually plucked from the security of the institution into the spotlight and placed under the magnifying glass of the state board of higher education. In dealing with some external publics, department chairs serve as the representative for the institution as well as the department. In interacting with high school and community college counselors, regional businesses, or civic organizations, department chairs speak for both the department and the institution.

Accountability initiatives designed to monitor the quality and cost-effectiveness of higher education have increased the importance of the department chair's role. Institutions cannot respond to externally imposed mandates for accountability of such things as student learning outcomes assessment without the support and leadership of department chairs. Department chairs are the primary interpreter of externally imposed mandates for department faculty, and the tone with which the chair presents those initiative influences faculty response. Today, the central administration needs cooperation and effective leadership at the department chair level more than ever in order to implement change and assure program quality. At the same time, department chairs are the primary source of information about specific programs and daily operations. This information is essential to the central administration as they champion requests for new resources or fend off attacks on institutional quality.

Department chairs, however, are more than agents of the central administration. They are also the primary spokespersons and advocates for the academic department. In this role, chairs are the guarantors of department quality. In fact, chairs are the only administrators with delegated responsibilities that allow for a direct influence on program quality. Further, department chairs are the only administrators with the requisite discipline training and vantage point needed to assess program quality and identify areas of needed change. As front-line managers, department chairs are both the chief advocate for the department and the primary agents of the central administration. Chairs need to champion the resource needs of the department and ensure the effective use of current resources. Chairs must promote the quality of the departments' programs while they remain alert to the need for curricular revision.

This dual role is more difficult because the various constituencies and external audiences with which the chair interacts tend to hold simple perceptions of the department chair's role. Faculty, for example, prefer to perceive the department chair as their primary spokesperson and advocate. Faculty are less inclined to perceive the chair's role as one that includes representing the central administration. Some faculty may even be outraged to think of their chair as an agent of the administration. At the same time, central administration may become irritated with a department chair who seems determined to argue the needs of the department in the face of an institutional crisis. The department chair, for example, who holds the line on increasing enrollment in the general education course to protect instructional quality may be viewed by the administration as jeopardizing course enrollment which, in turn, makes the institution less cost effective, an important datum for many state boards of higher education. Simultaneously, faculty may view a department chair who attempts to persuade them of the merit of designing a department assessment program as having "sold out" to the administration. The department chair often experiences stress as they walk the tightrope between serving the department, and faculty and students and representing the central administration. This dual role, however, is apparent in all of the responsibilities typically assigned to department chairs.

CHANGING ROLES FROM FACULTY MEMBER TO DEPARTMENT CHAIR

In talking with several hundred department chairs each year, we find that many say they were not prepared for the role shift from faculty to chair. Particularly, chairs being promoted from inside the department do not anticipate their life to be much different. While new chairs foresee having new responsibilities, they are not always prepared for the shift in how faculty colleagues and others treat them. Almost immediately, new chairs discover that long-time faculty colleagues (and friends) respond to them differently. Some faculty, for example, will assume that the new chair is "too busy" to join the informal lunch bunch now that he or she is an "administrator." Others will be less candid than previously in discussing issues affecting the department. Some may even avoid the chair. Yet, the same group of faculty colleagues are likely to hold high expectations for the performance of the new chair. Close acquaintances will expect the new chair to "fix" those policies and procedures about which he or she used to commiserate with faculty colleagues. Most faculty will expect the new chair to be able to "hold the line" with the administration on every issue because they trust the new chair to know the situation and have a full understanding of the department's needs. Walking the fine line between the role of colleague and department chair can be difficult.

John Bennett (1983, 2–6) identified three major transitions that new department chairs experience. The first shift comes in moving from being a specialist to functioning as a generalist. As a faculty member, an individual specializes in one academic area. However, when an individual becomes a department chair, he or she must have a thorough understanding of the full spectrum of department offerings. Moreover, faculty colleagues expect the new chair to represent all specializations within the department with equal enthusiasm. In addition to being held accountable for more content, the new chair is also responsible for a range of duties that faculty never perform. The new chair must acquire a substantive grasp of the total department as soon as possible because other faculty will be suspicious and critical of any chair who can only advocate his or her teaching and research specialty.

The second transition that department chairs experience is the shift from functioning as an individual to the task of running a collective. For the most part, faculty work independently at their own pace. Other than holding assigned classes or attending scheduled meetings, individual faculty determine when they work on course preparation, research, or other projects. On most campuses, individual faculty set their own office hours and determine when they come and go around class and meeting times. Department chairs, however, must orchestrate the work done by this group of individuals who work independently. Worse yet, some chair duties cause the new chair to interfere with the independence of individual faculty members. Chairs, for example assign courses and class times, schedule meetings, and solicit faculty attendance at special events such as recruitment or placement fairs and award programs. Chairs need to balance their respect for faculty autonomy with their responsibility for carrying out the department mission.

The third major transition described by Bennett is the shift from loyalty to one's discipline to loyalty to the institution. Chairs must represent the institution's perspective. There will be times when chairs may need to sacrifice a discipline need or a department preference for an institutional need. These tough decisions are likely to make chairs unpopular with faculty who recognize only the discipline perspective and may believe that the chair should place the department first in every situation. Whether or not the department implements a student learning outcomes assessment program may not be a matter for the department to decide. Similarly, campus policy on course enrollment and the need to involve faculty in student recruitment and retention activities are likely to be matters on which the chair cannot refuse the department's support and participation. Individuals who remain loyal to the discipline and fail to learn the institution's perspective and respond to campus needs become liabilities to the institution and undermine the standing of the department on the campus.

THE SELECTION PROCESS

One would expect that the increasing reliance upon chairs to carry out the heart of the institution's business would result in more thorough and competitive searches for skilled department leaders. Instead, institutions continue to fill department chair positions by hiring strong teachers and researchers who then must assume a role that requires very complex and challenging administrative skills. When chairs are sought externally, the position announcement typically lists demonstrated effectiveness in teaching and an established record of peer-reviewed research as essential qualifications. Seldom do chair ads include a listing of those skills and qualifications that would make an individual appropriate for a front-line managerial position. Chair applicants are not asked to demonstrate skill in managing conflict, effectiveness in designing marketing strategies for student recruitment, or proposals for enhancing alumni support.

Institutions are generally content to look internally when filling department chair positions. A national search may be conducted if the institution believes there is no acceptable internal candidate or in cases where it is felt that a person of national stature is needed to lead the department. For searches limited to internal applicants, the candidates may not receive a detailed job description, a fact which confirms the lack of thought given to the complex responsibilities assigned to department chairs. There are two basic models for conducting a search for a department chair. The first model uses a full-scale search process with the stipulation that applicants must be tenured faculty within the particular academic department conducting the search. All tenured faculty may apply and applicants are subjected to the typical screening procedures, including an interview with all appropriate parties. The department forwards its recommendation to the college dean. If the dean agrees with the recommendation, a new chair is appointed. In the second model, chairs are elected from within the department. That election may need confirmation in the form of formal appointment by the dean. The rotational model of selection is a variation on the election model. This may occur in small departments where serving as chair becomes a civic duty which each department member undertakes in rotation.

The term of service is variable. In some institutions, chair appointments are of indefinite duration, an arrangement more likely with a chair hired externally. Internally selected chairs usually serve for a fixed term, a procedure usually specified in the department operating manual. Terms are usually set at three or sometimes five years. Often, department guidelines stipulate a limit for term renewal. An individual, for example, may be required to vacate the chair position after serving two terms. The term of office of department chairs influences the perceptions and expectations held by both incumbent and colleagues. Chairs appointed for an indefinite term of office see themselves as formally

designated leaders. They assume that they have specific responsibilities, authority to carry those out and the power to support their decisions. Chairs elected to serve a three-year term are likely to perceive themselves as temporary managers. These chairs know that they will return to the ranks of the faculty on a prescribed date. Consequently, term chairs may make preserving their colleague relationships their top priority. They may be reluctant to tackle sensitive issues and reticent to engage in long-term activities. Their objective becomes not rocking the boat rather than leading the department through any significant change. As logical as this course of action may be given the limitations of a three-year term, it may discourage the proactive planning required in academic departments today. This drawback may be overcome if it becomes common practice to have chairs serve two consecutive three-year terms. That length of time carries the chair past the learning-the-ropes phase to a point where he or she has confidence in his or her leadership abilities. Renewable five-year terms can have the same advantage, though there may be reluctance in departments to see the same chair remain in place for a decade. Perhaps that is why chairs attending ACE's workshops more frequently report that their departments function with renewable three-year terms.

One of the peculiar features of the position of department chair is that most individuals accepting the position have little, if any, previous administrative experience to match the nature and magnitude of their new roles and responsibilities. Furthermore, institutions rarely offer formal on-campus training for new chairs. When such training is offered, it usually is limited to instruction on campus policy and regulations. Department chairs learn how to complete various budget forms and read available campus printouts. Seldom does on-campus chair training include professional skill development in such important leadership tasks as managing conflict, team building, or implementing change. In Chapter 1 of this text, we identified the available national training opportunities for department chairs. These seminars, workshops, and meetings focus on the professional and leadership skills needed by department chairs rather than any campus-specific policy or regulations. Still, these opportunities require the institution to make some initial investment in training chairs and, unfortunately, many institutions fail to do this. Where else in institutions of higher education do we hire an individual without appropriate previous experience and expect him or her to tackle admittedly difficult and complex responsibilities without benefit of relevant training? The special skill-needs of today's department chairs can be understood if we examine the chair's role in greater detail.

THE WORK OF DEPARTMENT CHAIRS

The lengthy list of department chair responsibilities can be organized into the following categories: department governance and office management; curriculum and program development; faculty matters; student matters; communication with external publics; financial and facilities management; data management; and institutional support.

DEPARTMENT GOVERNANCE AND OFFICE MANAGEMENT

Department chairs are responsible for all tasks supporting shared governance, from shaping the department mission and building consensus around department goals to conducting department meetings and implementing long-range department programs, plans, goals, and policies. For shared governance to work effectively, department chairs must encourage faculty members to invest in department planning. Chairs must lead faculty in determining what services the department should provide to the university, community, and state. Chairs keep department members mindful of the department mission and goals. They improve the university climate when they successfully manage these shared governance tasks within their departments. These tasks require chairs to be strong communicators, able managers of conflict, superb team builders, and sensitive facilitators of groups discussion.

In their capacity as office managers, chairs supervise and evaluate the clerical and technical staff of the department, maintain essential department records, assign office space, and determine departments' equipment needs. Department chairs interview and hire new staff, manage conflict among staff members, and ensure that the support staff service the instructional and administrative needs of the department. When necessary, chairs serve as liaison between faculty and support staff to make certain that the goals of the department are met. These duties require daily attention because ineffective office management can jeopardize the instruction and research priorities of the department.

CURRICULUM AND PROGRAM DEVELOPMENT

Chair responsibilities for department curriculum and program development fall into three general categories: instruction, research, and service. Responsibility for the instructional program includes such specific tasks as scheduling classes, monitoring library acquisitions, initiating curricular review and program development, and managing the department assessment program. It is the chair's job to collect, interpret, and present to the department data relevant to discussions about curriculum and program

effectiveness. It is also the chair's task to prepare the department for accreditation and program review. If the department offers graduate work, the chair must monitor dissertations, prospectuses, and programs of study for graduate students. These tasks require department chairs to be both coach and critic. He or she must both uphold the standard for quality instruction and inspire continual improvement.

When departments have a research mission, chairs are responsible for making certain that faculty understand and adhere to federal guidelines and campus policy on scientific standards. Chairs may help faculty secure the necessary resources to conduct research, including additional space, research assistants, equipment, and clerical support. The search for resources may even require chairs to be entrepreneurial, both within the institution and in seeking external assistance. In pursuing a research mission, chairs need to demonstrate their understanding of, and interest in, the research programs of individual faculty. They should also see that the department has a collective understanding of these endeavors and that, where possible, linkages are made between research projects that can multiply their results.

Most departments have some service programs although the degree to which the service activity is centralized varies greatly from one department to another. Even when service commitments are left to individual faculty, department chairs should monitor outreach and service programs to see that they promote the goals of the department. Visible and effective service programs can net tangible benefits for both the department and the institution, including positive press, funding support, internship sites for students, job placements for graduates, and in kind contributions. To carry out this responsibility chairs need to be well-versed in the activities of the department's faculty.

FACULTY MATTERS

Department chairs are ultimately responsible for the quality of faculty activity, even though most faculty work independently. Chairs recruit and select new faculty teaching loads and committee work, and evaluate faculty performance. Chairs, therefore, are accountable for managing faculty work assignments in a way that draws on individual strengths and maximizes collective success. Chairs make merit recommendations and initiate promotion and tenure recommendations. No administrator has more direct influence over the professional growth and development of individual faculty. Chairs are responsible for promoting professional development among both tenured and untenured faculty. On occasion,

department chairs must deal with unsatisfactory faculty and staff performance and, when necessary, initiate termination of a faculty member. These tasks require sensitivity to individuals, support for university standards for excellence, and adherence to institutional procedures.

At the same time, department chairs must keep faculty members informed of department, college, and institutional plans, activities, and expectations. Chairs need to encourage faculty participation in department matters, but must also mediate conflict among faculty members. When done effectively, these tasks establish and maintain morale within the department.

STUDENT MATTERS

Students are another important internal constituency that falls within the scope of the department chair's responsibilities. Chairs are ultimately responsible for the department's efforts to recruit and retain students. They have the power to make exceptions to department policy for students. For example, chairs can approve course substitutions, accept transfer credit, and waive program requirements for individual students. When departments have student organizations, the department chair must monitor the activities of these groups.

The chair's role as student advisor and counselor allows the chair to interact on an individual basis with numerous students. While these conversations may be the source of important anecdotal information about student learning and success, the department chair is also responsible for collecting aggregate data regarding student progress and success. Among the more frequently used measures of accountability are student learning outcomes assessment and graduation rates. It is the department chair who must know what data points are used by the central administration, the state board of higher education, and accrediting agencies to evaluate the productivity and effectiveness of the department. Sometimes chairs need to survey current students and alumni to gather information attesting to the quality of the department's instructional program. Chairs must know what information to collect, how to interpret the data for program improvement, and how to use it for program advocacy. When chairs are effective in performing these tasks, they help the department better serve students.

COMMUNICATION WITH EXTERNAL PUBLICS

The central administration, alumni, governing boards of higher education, accrediting agencies, area businesses, granting agencies, and state legislators are some of the external publics department chairs may need to address. The manner in which the chair communicates with these external publics can improve and maintain the department's image and reputation. The department chair is the primary spokesperson and advocate for the department with all external publics. It is the chair who completes forms and surveys received by the department, processes department correspondence and requests for information, and serves as liaison with external agencies and institutions. It is the department chair who communicates department needs to the dean and central administration and keeps the administration informed of department achievements and activities. It is also the department chair who coordinates activities with outside groups and represents the department at special events. Chairs need to be adept at recognizing the perspectives held by the various external publics and be able to structure the department communication with these groups in a way that enhances the department's relationship with them.

The task of communicating with external publics is time-consuming, but important to the long-term welfare of the department. Savvy department chairs go beyond responding to the requests of external publics to initiating communication with them. Department chairs may issue a department newsletter that keeps key external publics informed about departments' accomplishments and activities. They may survey alumni in order to encourage more significant relationships with graduates who may be able to contribute money, time, and talent to the department or institution. Department chairs may also solicit press coverage for department achievements and activities. These tasks utilize skills in public relations, persuasion, and marketing.

FINANCIAL AND FACILITIES MANAGEMENT

Department chairs prepare and propose department budgets, seek outside funding, and administer the department budget. They set priorities for the purchase of new equipment and the use of travel funds. The department's expenditures for any fiscal year should correspond with the department's annual and long-term priorities. It is easier to fulfill this responsibility if faculty understand and accept the department mission and priorities. For this reason, chairs must educate department members about the finances of the department. Department members will be less critical of the chair's actions with regard to spending department funds if they understand the context for budget decisions. As a campus administrator, chairs must adhere to state and university guidelines for spending department monies.

Chairs also have responsibility for managing the department's physical facilities. This responsibility encompasses the assignment of space and the maintenance of department equipment. Chairs have ultimate responsibility for the total department's inventory and must know when equipment is loaned out or in need of repair. They also must monitor department security and maintenance. Issues involving who gets keys to what rooms and storage closets become matters for the department chair to decide. Department chairs must inform central administration of needed safety renovations or repairs. In this regard, chairs are custodians of department space and equipment.

DATA MANAGEMENT

Department chairs have responsibility for managing the department's record-keeping system. They decide how long various computer printouts are kept and what summaries to make of data received or collected by the department. They control what information is forwarded to the department faculty and staff. Furthermore, they have considerable control over the form and substance of information shared within and outside the department. Because department chairs have virtually full responsibility for determining what data is collected and disseminated in support of the department, they need skills ranging from that of efficient data manager to that of analyst and expert advocate.

INSTITUTIONAL SUPPORT

Department chairs also have responsibility for promoting and advancing the welfare of the institution. In this role, chairs have an obligation to represent accurately state initiatives for higher education, the institutional mission, and mandates from central administration. Department chairs must represent and interpret campus policy accurately to department members and students. Chairs who attempt to befriend department members by bemoaning demands made by the administration shirk their responsibility to the institution. Chairs need very clear communication skills to fulfill their dual roles as primary spokesperson for the administration and chief advocate for the academic department.

THE POWER OF THE DEPARTMENT CHAIR

Department chairs who are aware of the long list of responsibilities assigned to them sometimes lament the fact that they lack the power to accomplish many of these delegated or assumed duties. This perception may, in part, be attributable to the tension inherent in the role itself. Chairs may experience discomfort in a role that places them in a position lying

somewhere between the faculty and the administration. Chairs often experience conflict over whether they are primarily a faculty person with some administrative responsibilities or an administrator with some faculty responsibilities. Nonetheless, chairs are not without power and it is valuable to understand the sources of power at their command. Generally speaking, the power of higher education administrators can be categorized into three types, depending on how and from where it is acquired—namely, power from authority, position power, and personal power.

POWER FROM AUTHORITY

Authority officially granted from a higher level in the bureaucracy is called "formal authority." It gives an individual the right to command resources or to enforce policies or regulations. The ultimate power from this source exists when a person to whom the authority is granted is able to make final decisions and firm commitments for his or her department without requiring additional signatures of approval. In the case of a state college or university system, the board of regents or board of trustees is empowered by the state legislature to operate and control the system. The board, in turn, delegates authority and responsibility to the college and/or university presidents for the operation of the individual institutions. The presidents delegate authority to vice presidents and deans. Any official authority chairs may have has been delegated to them by their deans; deans cannot delegate more authority than has been delegated to them by their vice presidents. Faculty members will permit their behavior to be influenced or affected by the department chair if they believe that he or she has formal authority.

POSITION POWER

Power that comes from having an appropriate title is called "position power." Recommendations made by people with certain types of position power are generally given more serious consideration than recommendations made by individuals who do not have it. Department chairs, by virtue of holding the title, may have influence not only with faculty members within their own departments but also with people in and outside the college over whom they have no authority or jurisdiction. Those who have such influence are perceived by some as having power. Chairs not only have the authority and responsibility to recommend salary raises, promotion, tenure, and teaching assignments, but they can often provide certain types of assistance to faculty members that faculty need but cannot provide for themselves, such as helping them develop professional acquaintances, recommending them for membership in select professional associations, nominating them for executive positions in their associations, helping them obtain sabbaticals or funds for travel to professional meetings, and helping them make contacts leading to paid consulting jobs. Moreover, department chairs frequently are asked by their faculty members to write letters of reference to other institutions in support of applications for new positions.

PERSONAL POWER

Chairs also use whatever personal power they may have. Faculty members will permit themselves to be influenced or affected in some way by the chair if they respect the particular individual holding the position. Personal power derives from peers' respect for and commitment to the chair. It is informally granted to the chair by the faculty members and depends on how they perceive him or her as an individual and as a professional. A chair with a great amount of personal power is usually perceived by the faculty as possessing some of the following characteristics: fairness and evenhandedness in dealing with people; good interpersonal skills; national or international reputation in the discipline; expertise in some area of knowledge; influence with the dean; respect in the academic community; ability and willingness to help faculty members develop professionally; ability to obtain resources for the department; highly regarded by upper-level administration; knowledgeable about how the college operates; privy to the aspirations, plans, and hidden agenda of the institution's decision makers; and ability to manage the department efficiently.

Personal power is not a power that can be delegated. Rather, it is a power that chairs must earn. The essence of personal power is credibility. It is, therefore, important that department chairs work to earn credibility with all relevant internal constituencies and external audiences. With credibility, department chairs have a personal power that inherently makes them more effective and able to manage the long list of responsibilities performed by department chairs. When faculty perceive their chair as credible, they are more likely to give the chair full benefit of the doubt in every decision or action. When chairs have high credibility, others are less critical of their decisions and they experience less resistance to change. On the other hand, chairs with low credibility find that others (faculty and the dean) second-guess all decisions. Without credibility, chairs face great resistance to their ideas and cannot be effective change agents.

THE POWER OF LEADERSHIP

Chairs remain uneasy about the issue of power. Few believe they carry much weight by virtue of authority, though the fact is that chairs probably possess more authority than they think they do. As for position power, the contradictions in the role of chair make it difficult to have much faith in the force of the title. Chairs do not have difficulty understanding that a major source of their power is personal. Their personal credibility is the most potent coin they have to put on the power table. However, there is a facet of that personal power that remains to be explored. If one defines leadership as the power to focus the energy of a group of people, the ability to guide the process of decision making, and the presence to get others to act in concert with each other, then the chair has the potential of being one of the most powerful leaders in the institution. That leadership capacity derives from a firm base of personal power, which

makes it so important to cultivate that credibility that underlies personal power. That power can be exerted to great effect in three areas: the department dialog, the department culture, and the department's actions.

The content of the departmental dialog says a great deal about the effectiveness of the department. If department meetings are clogged with long discussions of managerial matters or time is filled with hostile debate in which positions and proposed decisions are fruitlessly recycled, you have a marginal or dysfunctional department. The chair, without being an autocrat, can have a great influence on the content of that dialog. It may take persistence and patience, but the chair can shift the content of debate to issues that are truly important to the future health and prosperity of the department.

The chair also has great potential power over the culture of the department. A department riven with interpersonal rivalries and animosities has little hope of becoming collectively effective. Changing the dialog between people does not come easily. But if the chair is clear about what needs to change, he or she can transform unproductive dialog by intervening with new ideas, identifying destructive interchanges, and establishing standards of debate.

The chair possesses considerable personal power in guiding the department to take appropriate action. Academicians are often well practiced in debate. Depending on discipline, some find it difficult to move from debate to decision and from there to implementation. An important role for you as chair is as monitor of action. The first step is to see that debate is brought to closure and that decisions are made. Obviously, one does not want to truncate debate. If one does that, expect the decision to be recycled. However, there is a propensity to let debate take the place of decisions. A chair can fend off that outcome. Once decisions are made, someone needs to follow up to see that action has been taken. If no one is interested in whether a decision has been implemented, chances are the action will be delayed, deferred, and, ultimately, forgotten.

CONCLUSION

The complex role of department chair requires a skilled individual who can both serve and coordinate multiple constituencies. Institutional reliance upon department chairs as primary change agents and managers will continue to increase as institutions respond to external pressures for productivity and accountability. The central administration is powerless in preserving program quality. In fact, the very reputation of the institution depends on the success of its department chairs in bridging institutional and departmental needs. Despite the anomalous quality of the position, chairs have immense potential to affect the future of their institutions and of higher education in general. The roles and responsibilities of chairs has changed in two major regards. The fulcrum has tipped from concern for individual welfare of faculty to creating a successful working synergy among department faculty, and from being an advocate

for department desires to linking the work of the department to the broader institution, as well as to external audiences. This does not mean that the older interests of developing individual faculty and advancing the interests of the department are discarded. It does mean that those interests must now be combined with new needs and interests. Chairs may be short on formal authority or positional authority. However, for those interested in affecting the future of his or her colleagues, there may be no more important leadership position than that of department chair.

REFERENCES

Bennett, J.B. 1988. Department chairs: Leadership in the trenches. In *Leaders for a new era: Strategies for higher education*. Edited by M.F. Green, 57–73. New York: American Council on Education/Macmillan. Bennett contends that the “core academic success” of institutions of higher education rests upon the quality and capabilities of the chairs. Working from this premise, the author discusses the ambiguous but important role of the chair, the rewards and frustrations associated with the position, and the leadership opportunities for chairs. ———. 1983. *Managing the academic department: Cases and notes*. New York: American Council on Education/Macmillan. This text presents short case studies on the responsibilities usually assigned to department chairs. Chapter 1 contains a description of the department chair position. Gmelch, W.H. and V.D. Miskin. 1993. *Leadership skills for department chairs*. Bolton, MA: Anker Publishing Company. The authors describe four roles of the department chair: faculty developer, manager, leader, and scholar. The text examines ways in which chairs can create a productive department and enhance personal productivity. Lucas, A.E. 1994. *Strengthening departmental leadership: A team-building guide for chairs in colleges and universities*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass. In Chapter 2, the author discusses the roles and responsibilities of department chairs. The nine chair responsibilities described include leading the department, motivating faculty to enhance productivity, motivating to teach effectively, handling faculty evaluation and feedback, motivating faculty to increase scholarship, motivating faculty to increase service, creating a supportive communication climate, managing conflict, and developing chair survival skills. Murray, J. 1996. *Job dissatisfaction and turnover among two-year college department/division chairpersons*. ERIC Document Reproduction Service, No. ED 394 579. Proceedings of the 5th Annual International Conference of the National Community College Chair Academy. Phoenix. The authors discuss the cost associated with turnover in managerial positions and describe the relationship between role conflict or ambiguity and employee dissatisfaction. Drawing on relevant literature, the authors point out that the chair’s position is fraught with role conflict and

ambiguity. They recommend that the causes of job satisfaction among chairpersons be investigated and addressed.

Seagren, A.T., J.W. Creswell, and D.W. Wheeler. 1993. *The department chair: New roles, responsibilities, and challenges*. ASHE-ERIC Higher Education Report No. 1. Washington, DC: The George Washington University, School of Education and Human Development. This publication includes a summary of research conducted on the role of the department chair. The authors work from the research base to discuss the chair's role as a leader and evaluator of faculty performance. The report includes chapters on how politics, institutional types, and discipline influence the chair position. The authors conclude with a chapter describing the future challenges that department chairs face.