

Why Be a Department Chair?

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The day I became chair of the Division of Math and Sciences was very special, but not in the way I thought it might be. When I received the news of my appointment, I phoned some old friends with the happy news. The responses ranged from "you are insane" to "I'm sorry to hear that—how long is your sentence?" One offered her support but didn't actually congratulate me for two months. When I asked why, she said, "I thought you might get over it."

My dissertation adviser, a close friend, was actually the first to congratulate me, but immediately asked when the operation to remove half my brain was scheduled. When I asked which half, he replied, "Oh, the top half, where all the higher reasoning occurs." What was going on? Why did everybody think I was nuts?

I still don't know why others hold the job in such high disregard, but I do know why I accepted the challenge. It's not for the glory or prestige. There is no glory in being interrupted dozens of times a day and asked to solve problems you used to think were handled by the janitorial staff. Prestige is not found in my new office, which is still designated "home economics and laundry" on the building evacuation plan, much the way that the division secretary resides in the "storage and mop closet." And in case you think that the money enticed me, the division secretary promptly informed me that the chair is responsible for buying all the flowers and cards needed when division members or their families get sick, graduate from something, or get married. I later discovered that that list also includes holiday decorations, the occasional student worker's lunch, and office supplies when demand outstrips supply. And the pecking order for access to new equipment and supplies? Faculty are first in line, followed by support staff, and then the chair.

So why do it? Why is it the best job I've ever had? Simple. I have a hand in shaping our society. I'm not talking about how our division runs or its place in the larger college community. I'm talking about the ability to have a long-term, positive impact on the fabric of our culture. Carl Sagan got right to the heart of it when he said:

"To facilitate informed public participation in technological decision making, to decrease the alienation too many citizens feel from our technological society, and for the sheer joy that comes from knowing a thing well, we need better science education, a superior communication of its powers and delights."

Sagan's words guide my leadership, my teaching philosophy, and my career choices, perfectly illustrating my motivation as division chair, as a scientist, and as a teacher. The technological intellect of any society depends on the level of scientific understanding each individual citizen possesses. In the United States, as in many nations, the technological divide continues to grow. As chair, I can facilitate great science teaching. I can create a learning environment not only for my students, but also for hundreds of students in many different classes. I can add my voice to those of others, lobbying for better funding of science education at all levels.

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I center my leadership approach on the four pillars of our Glenville State College community: tradition, innovation, leadership, and community.

Tradition. I endeavor to keep the traditions of our division and college alive and part of our daily life. I keep the college community aware of our accomplishments, such as faculty grants and awards, or students' independent research or acceptance to graduate school. We recognize and celebrate these events by taking people to lunch, sending cards and flowers, and e-mailing the president and other top administrators to brag about our great people and their accomplishments.

Innovation. I encourage innovation in math and science education and support efforts to reach our students in new ways. Recently, one of my colleagues organized an environmental day for the college, inviting representatives from local and state government, as well as business and environmental groups, to campus. They interacted with the college community through scheduled talks, displays, and panel discussions. But rather than asking our students to write an essay reflecting on their experience that day, we asked each student to bring a friend or family member and then interview their guest about what they learned on campus that day. The results were astounding.

Leadership. I lead by example. Our college president often reminds us of Albert Schweitzer's words: "Example is not the main thing in influencing others. It is the only thing." By setting an example for others, I hope to empower them to take up the mantle of leadership and promote science and science education in our society.

Community. I immerse myself in our rich and diverse college community. For example, I support the arts, and by doing so, reduce the barrier between the arts and sciences in the minds of our students, our faculty, and even myself. By supporting athletics, I demonstrate to students that I'm interested in their efforts to excel outside the classroom, as well as inside it.

In summary, I believe the long-term fate of our nation and the continuation of our way of life lies far more in the hands of educators than politicians. I believe that I have the power to influence my world by influencing the lives of others. And every day, I strive to make a difference as an academic leader, a scientist, and an educator. That's why I do it; that's why I love it. I'm part of the solution and I help move our society forward.