

TOMORROW'S PROFESSOR_eMAIL NEWSLETTER

January 9, 2012

<http://cgi.stanford.edu/~dept-ctl/cgi-bin/tomprof/postings.php>

Folks:

The posting has a great perspective and some terrific advice on being a successful department chair. It is by Walt Gmelch, dean of the School of Education at the University of San Francisco. Email: whgmelch@usfca.edu. The article is from *The Department Chair: A Resource for Academic Administrators*, Fall, 2011, Vol. 22, No. 2. For further information on how to subscribe, as well as pricing and discount information, please contact, Sandy Quade, Account Manager, John Wiley & Sons, Phone: (203) 643-8066 (squadepe@wiley.com). or see: <http://www.josseybass.com/WileyCDA/WileyTitle/productCd-DCH.html>

Regards,

Rick Reis

reis@stanford.edu

UP NEXT: Civic Learning in College: Our best Investment in the Future of Democracy

Tomorrow's Academia

----- 1,522 words -----

Typology of Department Chairs: The Case of the Swivel Chair

Chairs swivel. Caught between the conflicting interests of faculty and administration, department chairs often don't know which way to turn. They must contend with expectations from the dean to cut costs while dealing with faculty who demand more travel funds, instructional material, technological help, and research dollars to maintain their expected productivity. While mediating the concerns of administration, chairs try to champion the values of their faculty. As a result, they find themselves swiveling between their faculty colleagues and university administration.

The work of administration and the work of scholarship do not make good bedfellows because the conditions needed to create scholarship are different from those needed for administration. Chairs experience double stress from performing not only their administrative role but their scholarly one as well. Not all chairs in fact, few, make a complete transition to department leadership and find balance with their scholarship.

They must learn to swivel without appearing dizzy, schizophrenic, or two-faced. In

essence, they are caught in the role of Janus, a Roman god with two faces looking in two directions at the same time. Although chairs don't have to worry about being deified, they do find themselves between a rock and a hard place: Chairs are at the heart of the tension between two potentially different value systems.

Why do chairs swivel? Academic department chairs are socialized as scholars first, and after seventeen years in their discipline they move into the position of chair. They didn't wake up one day in the third grade and say, "I want to be a chair!" They entered the academy to fulfill their faculty dreams. Then comes "the call." Many chairs are drafted by the dean or their colleagues, or they felt they "had to serve" as it was their duty or their turn (like musical chairs) or they didn't like the alternatives.

The academic department chair is the most unique management position in the country. Chairs find themselves in a role that has no parallel in business or industry. Do chairs still teach and produce scholarship? Absolutely yes — they are still faculty. What other managers take their previous jobs to their new ones and perform both?

The work of management, in general, is difficult because of its inherent paradoxes (Hill & Lineback, 2011). The swivel chair faces many paradoxes:

- Chairs must make their department a cohesive team without losing sight of their individuality.
- Chairs must build a community of scholars from a collection of academic entrepreneurs.
- Chairs are faculty, and chairs are administrators.
- Chairs are responsible for what others do; they herd cats and try to get them moving in the same direction, or at least in the same territory.
- Chairs must both develop their faculty and evaluate them.
- From their swivel position, chairs must have vertical vision (know what is happening above them at the dean and university levels) and horizontal vision (be well versed in all the disciplines across their departments).
- Chairs must focus on today — and tomorrow. These paradoxes create swivel chairs and define the fundamental nature of those who sit in them.

However, chairs dream of balance and serenity, if not in their professions, at least in their personal lives. Their ability to develop a balanced lifestyle depends on how well they make tradeoffs as they swivel between personal and professional demands and leadership and scholarship opportunities. What price do chairs pay for their venture into department leadership? Where will it lead? What are the benefits? What are the costs? Can they swivel, and balance their lives?

These paradoxes are never fully and truly resolved. The "right" actions will always be a matter of judgment. This is why universities need excellent and astute

department leaders. Becoming a chair requires a lengthy, difficult, and personal journey. Swiveling between “right versus right” decisions requires self-knowledge. Leadership is an inner, and often lonely, journey. It is about finding one’s voice and passion to serve.

Most chairs start their journey without leadership training, without prior administrative experience, and without a clear understanding of their role. As chairs move from faculty to administration, they move from the inner-oriented faculty psyche of being focused, autonomous, private, solitary, and a client of the department to the outer-oriented psyche of being fragmented, accountable, public, social, and custodian of the department (Gmelch&Miskin, 2011).

Advice for Swivel Chairs

For many department chairs, there are no easy answers concerning which way to turn. As the Cheshire cat told Alice, if you don’t know where you are going, any road will get you there. Let me share some advice before you begin the journey.

- Wait until you have been promoted to full professor and do not accept the position without tenure.
- Accept the position early enough to keep your options open if you want to move into university administration, but accept the position late enough so you have time to establish your academic credentials and credibility.
- Take time to learn the position.
- Find a confidant outside your department for guidance and direction.
- Seek a mentor chair to guide you through the initial white waters of academic leadership.
- Separate work and nonwork activities to maintain personal and professional balance.
- Create a golden parachute: Negotiate an automatic sabbatical to regain currency in your discipline after several years of serving your department and college.
- Find humor in the day and never leave for home without it. The chair who laughs, lasts.
- Finally, start by writing your legacy. What would you like your colleagues to say about your tenure when you leave the chair position? Then, plan how you will get there over the next four to six years.

Remember, on average chairs serve six years in their administrative post, with 65% returning to faculty status and only one in five continuing in administration.

Redesigning the Swivel Chair

Deans and colleges and universities must make the chair position more attractive, tenable, and meaningful for promising professors. Although the structure of the

chair role can't be totally redesigned, there are some ways to make the position more palatable.

- Create realistic expectations. The most predictive measure of department chair stress is imposing excessively high expectations. This is not to say to set your sights low, but not so excessively high that you don't enjoy the journey and small wins along the way.
- Purge unnecessary administrivia. Related to restructuring the position is the need to reduce the amount of paperwork and requests for reports rarely read, because high stress also comes from quantitative overload (that is, not overwhelmed by the leadership challenges, just inundated with meaningless administrivia). Concentrate on your department's high payoff activities rather than responding to the urgent but sometimes not so important. Each request should be measured against its contribution to the department's mission and goals and your personal aspirations.
- Reverse the hierarchy. Traditionally and structurally universities are top-down hierarchies. Chairs serve at the pleasure of, and for, the dean. This should be reversed. Why do deans exist? In part, to provide support for chairs, faculty, and students. After all, departments produce the students, programs, and scholarly products. In turn, chairs should serve their faculty, as the faculty serve the students.
- Protect academic productivity. Most chairs need more time for their scholarly pursuits and personal interests while serving departments. If your time for keeping current in your discipline and research is not protected, you may become dissatisfied and more reluctant to continue as chair. Blocking time for research, maintaining a separate research office, and seeking support for a research assistant will produce a work environment conducive to productive administration and scholarship.
- Prepare for reentry into the professoriate. Sixty-five percent of department chairs return to faculty after their term of service. How will you prepare to return? Have you negotiated a sabbatical to refresh your scholarship and reenergize your interests? After all, you have served your colleagues, department, and institution. Now how can the institution help you get back to your faculty roots and productivity?

Types of Department Chairs

There is no one right type of chair. Each is different and unique in what she or he brings to the position. In the spirit of finding humor in our position and not taking ourselves too seriously, consider these types of department chairs.

- Department chairs who don't know which way to turn faculty? administration? — are swivel chairs.
- Those chairs who play instruments are musical chairs.

- Those who overdress are upholstered chairs.
- Those who kick back and do nothing are recliner chairs.
- Those who collapse under pressure are folding chairs.
- Those unsteady on their feet are rocking chairs.
- Those who lazily go through the motions are lounge chairs.
- Those who do not have standards are easy chairs.
- Those who always complain are beach chairs.
- Those who write devastating reports are electric chairs.
- And those who dump on others are just plain stools.

References

Gmelch, W. H., & Miskin, V. D. (2011). Department chair leadership skills (2nd ed.). Madison, WI: Atwood.

Hill, L. A., & Lineback, K. (2011). Being the boss: The three imperatives for becoming a great leader. Harvard, MA: Harvard Business Review Press.

Archives of all past postings can be found at:

<http://cgi.stanford.edu/~dept-ctl/cgi-bin/tomprof/postings.php>

Sponsored by

Stanford Center for Teaching and Learning

<http://ctl.stanford.edu>

Check out the Tomorrow's Professor Blog at:

<http://derekbruff.com/site/tomprof/>