



# The business of universities and the role of department chair

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – The purpose of this research is to analyze traditional duties of academic administrators in light of fundamental changes in the ways universities operate, increasing demands in teaching, research and costs management, and a looming shortage of qualified faculty, to determine need and opportunity for a better administrative design.

**Design/methodology/approach** – Survey, interview and budget data are collected across a major public university.

**Findings** – Across seven categories of chair duties, 71.3 percent of time demands, more than 3.5 of 5 days in a typical week, involve general managerial tasks that require no discipline-specific academic credentials. Costs of performing these tasks, both in the way of lost productivity and extra pay, are compiled.

**Research limitations/implications** – While the personal and institutional costs of placing senior faculty in managerial roles has been well-discussed, prior research has not been directed toward quantifying those costs to suggest remedy.

**Practical implications** – Delegating appropriate duties to committee and non-academic staff could free senior faculty in leadership roles to remain fully active in teaching and research, the productive work of colleges they're highly trained and most needed to do.

**Originality/value** – This paper builds foundations for restructuring academic leadership more in tune with current realities within higher education so senior faculty are not consumed with duties more efficiently done other ways.

**Keywords** Educational administration, Universities, Management roles

**Paper type** Research paper

The mission of universities, the vision of upper administrators, the aspirations of faculty all intersect at the office of department chair. Central as the role may be, prior studies suggest becoming a department chair is seen not as a career advance, but a career disruption. Faculty take the job reluctantly, as a service and often at great personal sacrifice. It takes them away from both research and teaching – the productive work of colleges they're highly trained to do – to assume a managerial role that by either experience or disposition they may be less-suited to.

Over time, their currency may suffer, reducing the likelihood they regain their old level of productivity on any return to regular status. Further, these articles report a perceived impact on life quality, e.g. a decrease in personal time, an increase in stress, and estrangement from old colleagues and interests.

While shortcomings of the position may be well-researched, little has been directed toward remedy. Our purpose is to look deeper into the various functions typically associated with department chair to find possibility of a better design. In that regard, this paper reports survey, interview and budget data collected across a major urban public university.



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We begin by laying foundation in recent literature, followed by our study design, findings and alternatives they seem to suggest.

### Introduction

In a survey of department chairs, Gmelch (1991) probed the price of academic leadership, the tradeoffs it exacts in the chair's life. Most respondents reported taking the job from some sense of duty, without specific training, and often without any sort of prior administrative experience. They found themselves with greater workloads, with research interests falling prey to myriad demands, distractions and reporting requirements. Professional and personal time were both sacrificed and replaced with greater stress.

In a follow-up article, Gmelch *et al.* (1994) studied the sources of that stress, from negotiating rules and regulations to mediating disputes between faculty members. Program and personnel issues, meetings, random interruptions, the heavy workload all contributed. Age, gender, and academic discipline were not significant in determining the amount of stress experienced; the stressors were an inherent part of the job.

Bennett (1990) suggested strategies a dean might employ to improve the chair's situation, supporting the chair with guidance, clear expectations, accurate information, and inclusion in decisions relevant to the department. Still, Jones and Holdaway (1996) found perception that the chair's role was one of little authority and great responsibility. There seemed some disconnect as to what those responsibilities should even be. Deans saw the job as focused on curriculum design, program evaluation, and formulation and implementation of academic policy. Chairs themselves put faculty recruitment / selection and performance review as their top duties. Faculty saw only "faculty related" matters as being essential. The only consensus across levels was that academic research was very low on the scale importance for a department chair.

Nonetheless, there is impact from lost research productivity, as explored in Tang and Chamberlain (1997). Teaching and administration do not offer the sort of tangible measures of accomplishment found in publication. Institutional status – and all benefit flowing from that – derives largely from the number and nature of its published works. That status sifts down to faculty level where now individual careers advance little except through research. Individual and institution alike suffer consequence when productive energies are otherwise consumed.

Hargrove (2003) found frustration brings high turnover. Those with real affinity for leadership may not be naturally drawn to academia. Those that are so drawn typically have a different skill set. So perhaps much of the frustration – that borne of inexperience, perhaps even inaptitude – could be countered with specific training, faculty development programs targeting an administrative career path.

Brown (2001) broadly describes one such program and its effects at a particular university, specifically in helping department chairs feel more prepared for the role and more capable of balancing personal and professional lives. Sessions included some sort of orientation for new chairs, instruction on collegial processes, and various forums and workshops focused on topics such as "Managing Conflict", "Managing Performance in Your Department", "Enriching the Student Experience", and "Recruiting and Retaining Faculty". While participants indicated they found the program rewarding, there was no evidence any were more inclined to seek or keep jobs as department chair. The positions remain difficult to keep filled.

Other studies suggest the problem may soon become critical. Pisani (2003) notes the “graying” of faculty within the Georgia University system. More than 50 percent are nearing retirement age. Nationally, the figure is just above 40 percent. Ferreri *et al.* (2003) find the trend of candidates entering the pipeline is nowhere near expected levels of attrition. It will become increasingly expensive to dedicate senior faculty lines to administrative roles, at least as they are currently configured.

Henkel (2002) discusses how that configuration has evolved. Since the 1980s, universities have been nudged toward a more corporate posture, with increased accountability, quality assurance, and responsiveness to the outside world. From dean to department head, administrative roles have become more managerial than academic. The article revealed some measure of frustration among chairs. Had he wanted to run a business, one noted, he would have become a businessman. Yet here he was, confined to office, committee, and service activity while the “real work” of his science was being done by others. Still, the author argued an academic person is needed in a leadership role because others would have less grasp of faculty and research issues.

Birnbaum (1999) wrote that academics would only recognize leadership from another academic, that effective leadership cannot be imposed but granted, and this by legitimate selection of someone seen as having institutionally relevant expertise and shared values.

Green (1994) wrote about the formation of leadership teams, reducing direct responsibility on the chairperson, who would become more a mediator than primary decision maker. Rowley (1997) expanded on this, proposing these self-directed teams handle day-to-day responsibilities. The chair’s role would become more about coaching and training team members, serving as a contact point and overall coordination. Mech (1997) echoed the value of sharing authority, reducing job dissatisfaction and turnover.

Still, a number of questions present themselves. Is sharing authority a fix to a job already perceived as having too little authority? Is decision-making an aspect of the job chairs would choose to surrender? Would leadership teams actually reduce or simply reconfigure the managerial burden on department chairs?

Even the notion of better preparation raises questions. If the chair’s role requires special training, does it make sense to invest that in someone already highly and successfully trained to do something else? Would faculty candidates be more or less likely to accept the chair position if fully apprised of everything they’d be getting into?

### Search for answers

Traditional structures of governance and administration bear review given fundamental changes in the ways universities operate. Of all aspects and duties now lumped into the chair’s role, which genuinely require academician credentials? Which do academics enjoy, do well and cost-effectively? Of all other functions, what if anything prevents their being peeled away, simply abandoned or assigned to committees, professional or clerical staff? Would the benefit of any change be worth the cost?

This article draws data and opinion from across a state-supported, public university to begin answering some of these questions. With a current enrolment of approximately 22,000 students, it has thirteen academic schools and colleges, 5,700 faculty and staff and an annual operating budget approaching 700 million dollars.

Of sixty-six department chairs solicited – 20 with Arts and Sciences, 26 with the Medical, Dental and Nursing schools, 6 each from Engineering and Business, and 4 each from Education and Music – 40 returned completed survey instruments (61 percent).

As shown in Figure 1, the typical respondent reported more than 20 years experience in academia and having held the rank of full professor on becoming department chair. As many were fairly new to the position as well-established.

A sense of duty and the desire to effect change were cited as primary factors in becoming chair. Status, pay, or career benefits ranked less important. Though 82 percent felt serving as chair was an essential step toward higher administrative ranks, only 3 indicated desire to pursue that career path. Half expressed intention to one day return to regular faculty status.

Three in four felt they were prepared to enter administration, typically through prior leadership within academic committees, programs, or organizations. Very few claimed extensive experience managing anything outside academia, nor much in the way of mentoring or training targeting their becoming chair.

Only 40 percent felt demands of the position were matched by its rewards. The more tangible of these include reduced expectations in teaching and research – perhaps no expectations in these regards at all – as well as additional pay. While exact benefits are negotiated chair by chair – dependent on the size and complexity of the department, along with the wishes and attributes of candidates and their deans – a core expectation seems to be a two-ninths (22 percent) pay boost.

Specific compensation was not requested in the survey. However, base pay for each faculty member is detailed in the university budget. Total pay can involve a complex set of variables, particularly in the medical fields, where grants, practice plans and other sources may come into play. Drawing only from Engineering, Arts and Sciences and Business, the 32 faculty currently serving as department chairs show a cumulative base salary of nearly 3.4 million dollars (an average of \$105,881). The core two-ninths chair stipend, then, would average about \$23,500 or approximately \$750,000 across the three colleges.

Figure 2 details the perceived impact of becoming chair in specific areas, with zero reflecting no net effect;  $\pm 1$ , an effect significant but not extreme; and  $\pm 2$ , an extreme effect. On average, chairs concede little or no impact on collegial relationships, on professional development or practice, or on personal satisfaction. Teaching and research productivity show expected declines. Personal interests are shown to suffer. Stress levels and working hours are both seen greatly increasing, as are the general distractions and demands of everyday communications and administrative service. All fairly consistent with articles previously cited.

### Lost in the details

The central intent of this article is to gather further information to address the questions posed earlier. First, how much of the chair's job genuinely requires academician credentials? What productive capacity might be recaptured if all other duties were stripped away?

Hecht *et al.* (1999) defined seven categories describing the department chair's role. Given these, survey participants were asked to estimate two values for each: First, what percent of time-demands within that category could reasonably be done by

Current Academic Rank	31 (Full Prof.)	8 (Associate)	1 (Other)
Rank change since becoming Department Chair?	4 (yes)	34 (no)	
Years in Academia	6 (Less than 10)	7 (Between 10 and 20)	26 (More than 20)
Years as Dept. Chair	16 (Less than 2)	8 (Between 2 and 5)	15 (More than 5)

**Average rank given factors below in decision to become Department Chair:**  
(1- indicating most significant; 5 being least significant)

3.98	Supplemental pay	(Low significance)
4.10	Prestige/Status	(Low significance)
2.13	Opportunity to effect change	(High significance)
1.93	Service to Unit, Colleagues/Sense of Duty	(High significance)
4.18	Chosen Career Path	(Low significance)

**Respondents' indication of experience possibly supporting readiness to become Chair:**

<u>None</u>	<u>Some</u>	<u>Extensive</u>		<u>Overall</u>
22	14	4	Prior non-academic administrative/managerial experience	(Low)
5	21	14	Prior leadership within academic committees/organizations	(Med-Hi)
10	18	12	Involvement in academic program administration/development	(Med)
17	17	6	Mentoring by predecessor or other chairs	(Lo-Med)
23	11	6	Participation in specific training/development programs	(Low)

**Respondent long-term career plans:**

20	(Return to regular faculty after serving as chair)
3	(Pursue higher administrative rank)
6	(Continue indefinitely as department chair)
10	(Not sure)

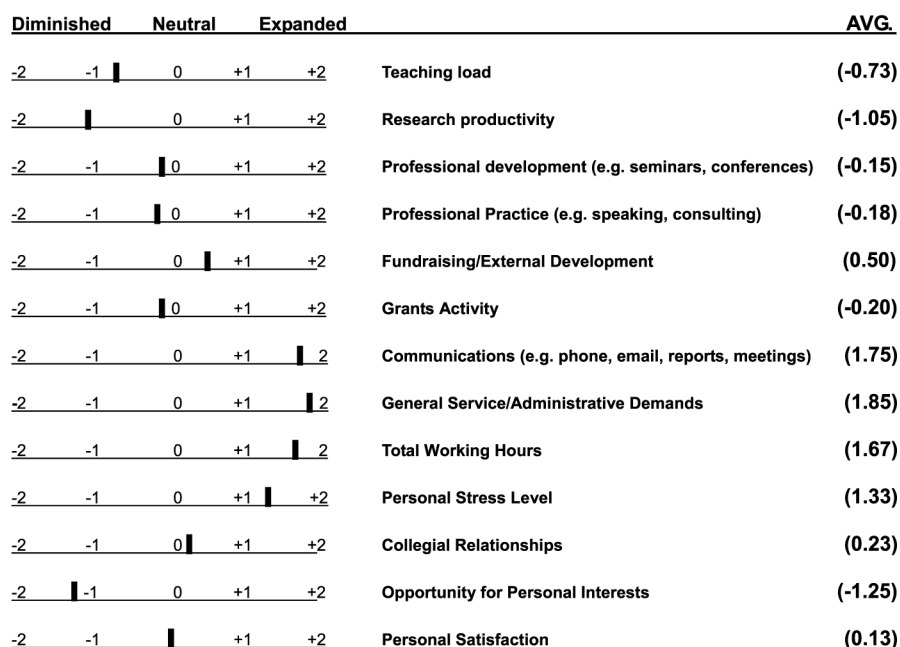
In retrospect, do you feel you were adequately prepared to become Department Chair? **30** yes **10** no

Generally, do you feel the rewards of the position are commensurate to its demands? **15** yes **22** no

Do you feel experience as Department Chair is an essential qualification for higher administrative ranks (e.g. dean, provost)? **32** yes **7** no

**Note:** Totals below 40 indicate some non-response

**Figure 1.**  
Respondent breakdown



**Key**

0 = no net effect; +/- 1 = effect significant but not extreme; +/- 2 = extreme effect

**Figure 2.**  
On becoming department chair, impact by category

non-faculty (i.e. how much required just good managerial skills, 0-100 percent)? And second, what percentage of overall time-demands does that category constitute (presuming categories sum to 100 percent).

Table I provides average responses. The first category – department governance and office management – is seen consuming 25.6 percent of the average chair’s time. Nearly 86 percent of that time, respondents feel, entails duties which do not require faculty background or discipline-specific knowledge. Multiplying the two percentages

	% M	×	% J	=	% R
Department governance and office management	85.5		25.6		21.9
Curriculum and program development	45.0		14.2		6.4
Faculty matters	62.5		21.7		13.6
Student matters	49.5		10.5		5.2
Financial and facilities management	90.0		15.2		13.7
Data management	81.5		5.6		4.6
Institutional support	82.5		7.2		5.9
Total job time recoverable (%)					71.3

**Notes:** % M, percent of time-demands within category that could be done by non-faculty (0-100 percent); % J, relative time-demands of entire category (all categories sum to 100 percent); % R, percent of job time recoverable if chair relieved of duties assignable to non-faculty

**Source:** Categories from Hecht *et al.* (1999)

**Table I.**  
Department chair functional breakdown

gives some measure of how much of chairs' time could be refocused if these duties were reassigned (21.9 percent). Summing this value across all seven categories, potential time recovery is 71.3 percent, more than 3.5 of 5 days in a typical week.

This expands into the second of questions posed earlier: Which aspects of being department chair do academics enjoy, do well and cost-effectively? What would they prune? Preserve? The questionnaire approached this with two open-ended questions, drawing common threads in response.

Among the most rewarding aspects of being chair, respondents wrote, are unique opportunities to mentor junior faculty, nurture students, and affect the vision and quality of the institution.

Negative aspects begin and end with conflict resolution – between students and faculty, faculty and each other, wants and resources, duty and privilege. Electronic mail has short-circuited filtering processes that once culled minor issues. Chairs now find themselves first resort of every complaint, need, and inquiry, most expecting careful and immediate response.

Too many meetings, too much paperwork (particularly program and personnel assessment), faculty egos, and crushing bureaucracy were also noted. There is perception of being unappreciated and in some ways, even isolated. Reduced teaching and research expectations – the tradeoffs that allow time for administration – are hardly benefits to those who entered academia for love of these activities, and diminished participation in either teaching or research can bring feelings of falling outside the mainstream. Not incidentally, there was concern this “diminished participation” can not only atrophy the chair's professional skills but affect their immediate credibility in assessing the teaching and research of others.

The spirit and productivity of some of the most valuable members of academia are being consumed in the aggravations of daily minutia.

### **Refocusing leadership**

Academia does indeed need academics in leading roles. Others with less grasp of discipline, faculty and research issues would simply not be effective. But for many department chairs, “leadership” has become more about pulling the cart than holding the reins, a problem that might just be easy to fix. The mechanisms are likely already in place. It may only require new protocols.

University governance typically includes committees focused on specific facets of operation – committees that oversee academic programs; faculty scholarship, travel and professional development; personnel matters like performance, promotion, and equity review; grievances filed by students, staff or faculty; and potentially many more.

These are usually chaired by senior faculty and staffed by others who have interest, aptitude or obligation within the committee's charge. Participation is a faculty service commitment and seldom affects other workload or performance expectations.

Department chairs are often bound to compile the information committees act upon or implement decisions committees make. For example, the undergraduate program committee may elect the mix of courses to be taught. It is then up to the chair to find resources (assign faculty, recruit adjuncts), develop a schedule (reconcile class size, technology needs, classroom availability, course conflicts), approve syllabi, handle

exceptions like overload requests, student waivers and other problems, and ultimately assess and document performance. . . in general, pull the cart.

There seems no technical reason much of this cannot be shifted back to the committee. Doing so would conceivably benefit not just the department chair but coherence and consistency across the college. Committee chairs or designated members would become the first resort of anything within their charter. Disgruntled students would appeal first to the appropriate grievance committee. Faculty travel, technology, or other funding requests would submit first to the scholarship committee, and here, decisions might rely on some assessment of the applicant's research, which in turn would fold neatly into the annual review process.

Chairing a department could become no more consuming than, say, chairing a major committee, centered more on the big picture – building consensus, developing faculty, handling issues at the higher level, all the things academics do well and find rewarding, including time in the classroom and in research.

Until new protocols become routine, the department's administrative assistant could route communications sent in error to the chair. Better yet, the assistant position could be upgraded, with x-pay once allocated to the chair, to something like unit business manager – a professional, but non-academic position that would interact with program, personnel, and other committees to work the nuts and bolts of getting things done.

Department chair could become a position attractive to the best and brightest in academia without the personal and institutional costs it now entails.

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