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A Toolbox for Department Chairs

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DEPARTMENT CHAIRS work on higher education's front line, but they often wish they had more training – and more respect. Sandwiched between the administration and the faculty, chairs are heavily involved in hiring and firing decisions, settling conflicts among colleagues, negotiating for money and positions, making student success a priority, and numerous other tasks central to daily life in the academy. This collection includes many of *The Chronicle*'s best reads on how to successfully manage a department.

COVER ILLUSTRATION BY SAM KALDA FOR THE CHRONICLE

SECTION 1

The Chair's Job: Rewards and Pitfalls

NICOLAS OGONOSKY FOR THE CHRONICLE

The Faculty Job (Almost) No One Wants

Chairing a department has never been easy. The pandemic only made it tougher.

By MEGAN ZAHNEIS

Mary Beth Dawson had been as prepared as possible to lead her department through a pandemic.

Dawson, who chairs the biology department at Kingsborough Community College, had kept an eye on news from around the world before Kingsborough's spring term began in the first week of March 2020. As a scientist, she was trained to think in terms of potential outcomes, and she instructed her faculty to be ready to move their classes online at a moment's notice.

So when the call came from the City University of New York system to switch to virtual learning, Dawson and her colleagues were ready. It was, in Dawson's words, a "seamless" transition for her department.

But a few weeks later, two of Dawson's adjunct faculty members realized they weren't up for teaching online and quit. That meant Dawson took on their courses; she wasn't about to ask her other faculty members to take on extra teaching amid a burgeoning pandemic. That semester, Dawson taught 14 contact hours and worked six days a week, for 12 to 15 hours each day, all while keeping the department running and helping manage her colleagues' anxiety — something that she, even with several years as department chair under her belt, hadn't anticipated.

The pandemic, Dawson soon realized, fundamentally changed what it meant to be a department chair, already a job known for being demanding and, in many circles, undesirable.

Chairing a department has never been easy. Doing so means occupying a strange in-between position in academe — not quite an administrator, nor only a faculty member — and navigating a complex set of workplace dynamics, particularly with department colleagues whom a chair, for the duration of her term, is asked to supervise and evaluate.

The chair's position is often assumed to come with a measure of power and prestige; upon landing the gig, Sandra Oh's character in the Netflix limited series *The Chair* proudly places a nameplate on her desk declaring her the one "in charge," embellished with a handful of expletives. But upon taking over as chair — which, as many will attest, does not often include the cushy office Oh's character inherits — scholars are more likely to find themselves hemmed in by administrative constraints and what they call an illusion of power.

"As a chair, you certainly have more institutional responsibility than most of your colleagues. You have some authority, although not very much. In most systems, you really don't have any power at all," said Kevin J.H. Dettmar, a veteran department chair who has written a book about the job. "You're the fall guy or gal; you're responsible. But in terms of power, prestige? No, not really."

Instead, the chair is often caught in the crosshairs of conflict between faculty members or administrators, struggling to stake a claim in both worlds.

The desire to make change, or to positively influence one's department, is one reason faculty members take on the role of chair. More often, though, they do so out of a sense of duty or are conscripted into the job by administrators or colleagues. That's what happened to Cathy Marie Ouellette, who took over the history department at Muhlenberg College in the summer of 2019 for a four-year term.

Ouellette, an associate professor, had seen other chairs struggle with exhaustion and with keeping their own scholarship current. Because she wasn't yet eligible for promotion to full professor, she worried that the administrative responsibilities of being chair would interfere with her own professional goals.

Indeed, 86 percent of chairs reported in a 2004 study that they'd significantly reduced their scholarly activities while in the role, and 88 percent said they were frustrated by their inability to spend much time pursuing their academic interests.

Ouellette took four meetings with her

provost, who was supportive of her personal goals, before agreeing to the gig, but said, "it's understood that you can't really say no. I think I was a little stubborn."

It stands to reason, then, that colleagues "are as likely to say condolences" as they are to congratulate incoming chairs on their new role. So said Carolyn Dever, who co-facilitates *The Chronicle*'s workshops for department chairs. "It's more of a duty than it is a calling for many people," Dever said. "They're sandwiched between the administration and the faculty and students without very many tools for solving problems and addressing the really complex issues that come up."

That's another condition of being chair: It's likely to come with little in the way of training. A 2016 study found that 67 percent of chairs hadn't received any formal training from their institution; two-thirds of those who did said it didn't adequately prepare them for the job. Nor are there many handbooks on how to be an effective chair; the few there are tend toward the wonky side, said Dettmar, who hopes his forthcoming book will fill that gap.

Ouellette's preparation for becoming chair, then, was mostly "self-imposed." "Honestly," she said, "the first thing I did was Google 'how to be a department chair.'"

Most of Ouellette's prior understanding of what it meant to be a chair came from graduate school, where, she said, "it was really communicated pretty clearly, 'Have some empathy, don't bother the department chair.' So I assumed as a graduate student that this was a stressful and perhaps exhausting position."

Ouellette started to think of a chair's role as that of an ambassador — of the institution, of the department, and, in her case as a historian, of the humanities. Student and faculty recruitment would become part of her job, as would advocating at the administrative level for her department. Still, she recognized her place within the college's power structure was a complicated one.

"Sometimes chairs think that what they have is power and authority," Ouellette said. "I think that I have obligations." As a chair, she learned, people could look to her for guidance. But Muhlenberg's faculty handbook didn't endow her with the ability to add teaching lines, hire or fire faculty members, or adjust the budget. At institutions like hers, she said, "department chairs don't have a lot of leverage. They can advocate, they can cajole, they can bring people together. But we don't have the capacity and we are not embedded with any authority to make institutional changes."

> Department chairs are "sandwiched between the administration and the faculty and students without very many tools for solving problems and addressing the really complex issues that come up."

OUELLETTE'S FIRST SEMESTER as chair, the fall of 2019, went swimmingly. She welcomed a new hire and started to work on fostering department culture, establishing a social-media presence and a speaker series. Armed with those small victories and the "little sugar high" that came along with them, she felt ready to turn her attention to curricular reform and other big projects.

Then came the pandemic. Ouellette did her best to maintain social ties within the department by setting up a weekly social Zoom session for her junior colleagues. She stressed flexible work policies, knowing many of her co-workers had young children at home. She worked to make sure students were supported and oversaw the sudden retirement of a faculty member who decided Zoom teaching wasn't for them. And she became tethered to her phone.

"There were moments there where my job changed dramatically before my eyes," she recalled, "and my phone became like a third eye or a third hand."

Dawson, at Kingsborough, felt similarly tethered to work, partially out of an obligation to be reachable any time her faculty needed her. That was uncharacteristic for Dawson, who is "very much a boundaries person" and customarily doesn't email her colleagues in the evenings or on weekends. No more: "I had to sort of put that aside and say, 'You know what, I need to be available to these people, because this is an unprecedented situation.'" Her role, as she saw it, was to field panicked calls and emails with an eye toward resolution. "We can fix this," became a common refrain, she said, even if "sometimes I had to lie; I wasn't even sure if we could, but I said we could."

Then there was the matter of classes themselves. In April 2020, Dawson had to plan course offerings for the fall semester without knowing what path the pandemic would take. The lab spaces in her biology department were booked during every available time frame of the academic day, meaning she couldn't open up extra sections in order to reduce class sizes and allow students to socially distance. Not normally one to question her decisions, Dawson agonized over this one for months. "All summer, every day, I thought about this multiple times a day," she said. Ultimately, many classes that planned to meet face to face in the fall had to go on pause for several weeks while social-distancing arrangements were made, or revert online entirely.

Department chairs still face those sorts of conundrums daily. Some have also been put in uncomfortable positions as they enforce institutional decisions, like whether faculty members have to teach in person, Dever said.

"They may profoundly disagree, but they're in the role of having to carry out whatever it is that the institution has decided. What makes the pandemic much more challenging than regular life," she said, "is that it's people's health and safety that's on the line, and people's educations, and so a chair has to live with the high, high stakes of a decision every day."

In a pair of studies conducted during the pandemic, in 2020 and 2021, by Ralph A. Gigliotti, the assistant vice president for Rutgers University's Office of University Strategy, many department chairs at Big Ten colleges said the job straddled the line between faculty member and administrator more than ever. All that turmoil is having a clear, and alarming, effect on chairs: Just 22 percent agreed or strongly agreed that they would be more likely than not to serve another term.

DETTMAR UNDERSTANDS why chairing is generally an undesirable position. It requires that one gives up a lot of freedom — to pursue one's own scholarship or set one's own schedule or even to protest administrators' actions. ("It's just sort of unbecoming or ridiculous to rage against the machine when you're department chair" and helping to run the place, Dettmar said.)

He knows the liminal place between faculty and administration that chairs occupy all too well. His first job as chair was at a unionized campus; as a chair, he wasn't included in the faculty bargaining unit. Dettmar paid union dues anyway, because he wanted to demonstrate to his colleagues that he saw himself as a faculty member. Still, he got mixed messages. "I felt like the faculty don't think of me as a faculty member, but the administration's really clear that I'm not really an administrator," he said. "I didn't have any natural allies."

Nothing in Dettmar's graduate training — which focused on individual scholarly growth and not building community — taught him to value chairing. He heard some say, "Those who can, do; those who can't, chair." The idea that a faculty member could be "relegated to a bureaucrat because you're not one of the leading lights of your generation" was, he felt, both pervasive and damaging.

After 10 nonconsecutive years running the English department, Dettmar began directing Pomona's Humanities Center instead, thinking his days leading departments were over. But when the dean called in July 2021 to ask Dettmar if he would consider filling in as chair for the theater department, which was dealing with personnel changes, the answer was yes.

If the academy is to make chairing a department a more appealing proposition, there are a few natural places to begin. One is compensation.

"Chair can be something that you are or something that you do. And 95 percent of chairs, it's something that they do," Dettmar said. He falls into the small group that consider chairing part of their identity.

He said that's because he's good at it, and because he can use it to help others. He's crossed off all of the brass rings of academe — gotten tenure, been promoted to full professor, been a named chair.

"Instead of writing another scholarly book that 17 people would read," he said, "I'd rather put my energy into helping a younger generation of scholars be able to write their books."

If the academy is to make chairing a department a more appealing proposition, there are a few natural places to begin. One is compensation.

While the specifics vary by institution, most chairs receive a course release, a stipend, or some combination of the two in exchange for their service. Sometimes other perks, like an extended sabbatical or extra research funding, can be negotiated. But by and large, those affordances "aren't commensurate with the demands of the job," Dever said.

They are, perhaps, even less so for younger scholars who take on the role of chair. In an ideal world, a scholar shouldn't become chair until they're a full professor and have established their personal research agenda. But increasingly, faculty members are being tapped as chair earlier in their careers, and that's especially true of women and of scholars of color, said Walter H. Gmelch, a professor of leadership studies at the University of San Francisco who has studied department chairs for more than three decades.

That's a crucial trade-off of institutions' desire for more equity for women and people of color, Gmelch said. By achieving greater representation in departmental leadership, institutions may in fact harm individual scholars and "jeopardize their career and their advancement," he said.

After all, Gmelch said, most scholars don't treat chairing their department as a steppingstone to administration. About 70 percent return to the faculty after their term is through.

Establishing both initial and ongoing training for department chairs — sessions that focus on "soft skills" like leadership, in addition to administrative know-how — would help, too. Many chairs pass down those lessons informally, and Gigliotti's office at Rutgers is working to design a new program for department chairs that they hope will become an example. Dawson and another Kingsborough chair teamed up to write a chair's handbook, a "living document" full of resources that they're hoping to parlay into a more-formalized chair training at their college.

Academe could also benefit from a greater appreciation and recognition of the chair's duties, which often are largely invisible, department chairs and experts told *The Chronicle*.

"We are most definitely doing things that faculty don't even realize that we do," Dawson said. "The best chairs do these things quietly, to keep the ship afloat and take care of the details, and sometimes ugly things and sticky things, and insulate the faculty from that so that they can do their jobs accordingly."

A re-examination of what chairs can, and should, do for their departments could be in order. "I don't think that many chairs are recruited into the job with a sense of mission or a vision," Dever said. "It tends to be a 'keeping the trains running' type of job, which is understandable, but also too bad."

In fact, a chair's job is one of the most influential on a campus, said Gmelch, the leadership scholar. Chairs are instrumental to a university's productivity in scholarship, teaching, and student success.

Ouellette, at Muhlenberg, recognizes the importance of chairing, and she's proud of what her department has accomplished during her term. Sometimes she even contemplates signing on for a second term.

"There are moments where I think, 'Hey, this isn't so bad. I can keep doing this,'" she said. "The reality is that I'm still teaching four classes a year. I'm still researching and writing, I have a personal life, and there's a pandemic, and I think, 'I can't wait to be done.'

"I really hope I don't have to do this again."

Megan Zahneis, a staff reporter for The Chronicle*, writes about research universities and workplace issues.*

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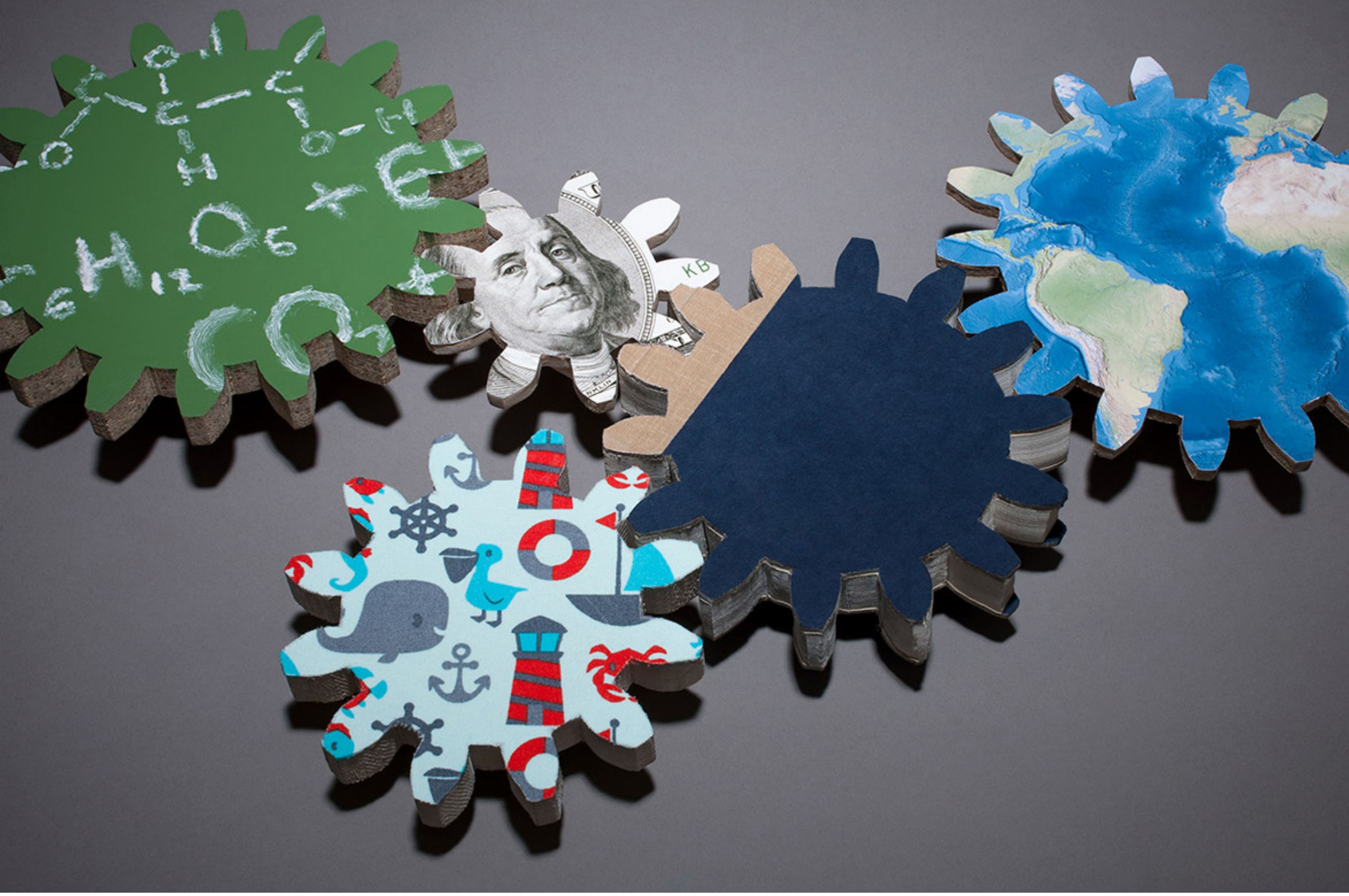

KEVIN VAN AELST FOR THE CHRONICLE

Your To-Do List as Chair

Here are the five core responsibilities you will face in leading your department.

By ROB JENKINS

THE JOB OF LEADING a department can differ greatly from one college to the next, and even from one department to the next on the same campus.

Some chairs are more like assistant deans — their jobs include fund raising as well as departmental oversight, and they teach very little, if at all. Other chairs are merely first among equals — meaning they continue to teach but may be granted some release time from classroom obligations to handle scheduling and other administrative tasks. Some chairs play a major role in hiring and evaluating faculty, while others do little more than manage the paperwork.

Some oversee huge budgets, with a great deal of say in how the money is spent, even as others struggle to find a few dollars for dry-erase markers.

Regardless of the job description, however, if you're thinking about becoming department chair you will have to fulfill at least five core functions to be effective. Some readers might argue there are more than five. But having worked at seven different colleges and served as a department head at two of them, I have identified these five as the most universal and the most important of a chair's responsibilities.

Advocate for faculty. Chairs occupy a unique and sometimes ambiguous position between the administration and the faculty. To add even more ambiguity, many chairs aspire to reach the upper levels of administration, while others view the position as a temporary tour of duty and look forward to returning to the classroom full-time.

If you fall in the former group, it's natural to think of yourself as primarily an administrator and to therefore embrace the party line on issues where the faculty and the administration might be at odds. But that is generally a mistake. In my experience, the most effective department leaders see themselves as faculty first and administrators second. Their primary role, as they see it, is to advocate for their department — for its programs and especially for its inhabitants.

Of course, faculty members are not always right, and the department's needs don't always supersede those of other departments or the college as a whole. Good chairs understand that and are prepared to make principled compromises where necessary. But a chair who is not seen, first and foremost, as the department's advocate with higher-ups will likely have a tumultuous and perhaps brief reign.

Represent the administration. It sounds contradictory but the fact is: Department chairs *are* administrators, even if they occupy the lowest tier. There will be times when you have to present some policy or decision to the faculty, on behalf of the administration, knowing it will not be well-received. In many cases, you will not be thrilled with the latest edict either.

In a perfect academic world, with shared governance, faculty will already have been involved in the decision-making process, so the chair won't be put in such an awkward position. But that ideal is hardly ever realized, and as chair, you will often find yourself charged with "selling" something to the faculty that you aren't entirely sold on yourself.

I've heard people say that chairs have a duty to get on board and support the administration, even if that means faking enthusiasm for some odious pronouncement. I disagree. I think it's fine for a chair to say, in essence: "Look, I don't agree with this either, but I don't have any more say about it than you do. We'll just have to make the best of a bad situation." That sort of candor generally earns the respect of the faculty (if not of the deans and the provost) and enhances the chair's effectiveness within the department. Your faculty members will appreciate knowing you are on their side, even if you are similarly powerless. At least you're powerless together.

In such difficult situations, you will have to use your powers of persuasion to help faculty accept and adapt to the new reality and to prevent morale from plummeting. You must strive to appear as positive and optimistic as possible: "This may seem bad, but we'll figure out a way to deal with it together." And you must be creative in identifying ways to respond to the new mandate without inconveniencing faculty or disrupting the work of the department any more than necessary.

Build consensus. As chair, you will have very little control over whether your institution as a whole embraces shared governance. But typically, you will have a great deal of influence within your own sphere. You can employ the principles of shared governance within your department, regardless of what anyone else at the institution is doing.

That means, first of all, enfranchising all members of the department, including assistant professors, non-tenure-track faculty, and adjunct instructors. It means making sure the committee structure within the department exists not just to perform the necessary "scut work," like selecting textbooks and making adjustments to the curriculum, but also to serve as a vehicle for shared governance. It means ensuring that those committees are as inclusive as possible, with everyone who has a stake having a seat (or at least a representative) at the table. It means listening to those groups and taking their conclusions and recommendations into account. And it means seeking departmental consensus on any decision that will affect the entire department.

One of your most important roles as chair is to create a "safe place" where faculty members who feel that their voice is not being heard can speak out freely.

Provide a forum. Speaking of inclusivity, one of your most important roles as chair is to create a "safe place" where faculty members who feel that their voice is not being heard can speak out freely. That certainly includes adjuncts and other contingent faculty, who may feel — with good reason — that the only place they can be heard is at the department level. But it might also include tenured professors who feel totally disenfranchised at the institutional level — again, perhaps with good reason — and who rely on the department as a forum for offering their ideas (good and bad), expressing valid concerns, or just venting.

That forum might take the form of a departmental meeting. You should probably consider holding regular meetings whether you want to or not. When I was a chair, I didn't like meetings (I still don't) and was inclined to cancel or postpone them if I didn't think there was anything particularly important to talk about. I quickly learned, however, that just because I didn't think certain topics were important didn't mean others in the department had the same perception. Faculty members, even though they might not like meetings either, nevertheless need them occasionally. That might be the only place they have to raise an issue they are concerned about.

In addition to scheduling regular department meetings, you should also maintain an open-door policy, allowing faculty members to drop by at their convenience to talk about whatever is on their minds. Keep in mind: Their convenience isn't always convenient for you. As chair, your job exists primarily to serve faculty.

I've known chairs who closed their office doors for a couple hours each day so they could get some work done, but I've never believed in that. If I was in my office, my door was always open. (Of course, I was known on occasion to tell my administrative assistant I had a meeting, then sneak off to the library to slog through paperwork in some remote alcove.)

The end result of all this listening might be just that — simply listening, providing a sympathetic ear. Chairs can't necessarily do anything about the issues that concern faculty, especially when those issues are above your pay grade. But often you can take steps to make department life a little easier for faculty, and sometimes you can take their concerns to the people above you and push for change. Occasionally you might even be successful, particularly if you band together with other like-minded chairs.

And if just listening is the best you can do — well, at least faculty members will feel like they're being heard by someone, and that's often better than nothing.

Provide vision. This is the crucial one. Over the years I've been amazed to observe that — no matter how independent-minded individual department members might be — the department as a whole tends to take its cue from the chair. A chair who is generally positive fosters optimism among faculty, whereas one who is negative generates pessimism.

Beyond that, you are responsible for imbuing faculty with a feeling of shared purpose and an understanding of their individual and collective roles. It's up to you and your department's faculty whether you want to draft a formal "vision statement." I've always thought of vision as something more abstract — implicitly understood rather than explicitly spelled out. But I know that some prefer to spell it out.

If your department does wish to create a mission statement, here are some important questions for the group to consider:

- What are our core beliefs and values?
- What are our most important functions?
- What do we want this department to be known for?
- How do we accomplish that?
- What are our professional standards and expectations?
- How do we fit into, and complement, the larger institution?

Note: That last one is especially important, as your department's vision must mesh — or at least not entirely conflict with — that of the institution.

Many have observed that the department chair's job is probably the hardest in all of higher education, caught perpetually between administration and faculty, neither fully one nor fully the other. I've certainly experienced that in my career. But it is also the most personally rewarding job I've ever held, in that I felt I had the opportunity to make a positive difference in people's lives, both faculty members and students, every single day.

Despite its inherent difficulties, the job becomes more manageable once you understand why, mundane tasks aside, you're there. And that is, ultimately, to serve faculty, students, and the institution — in that order.

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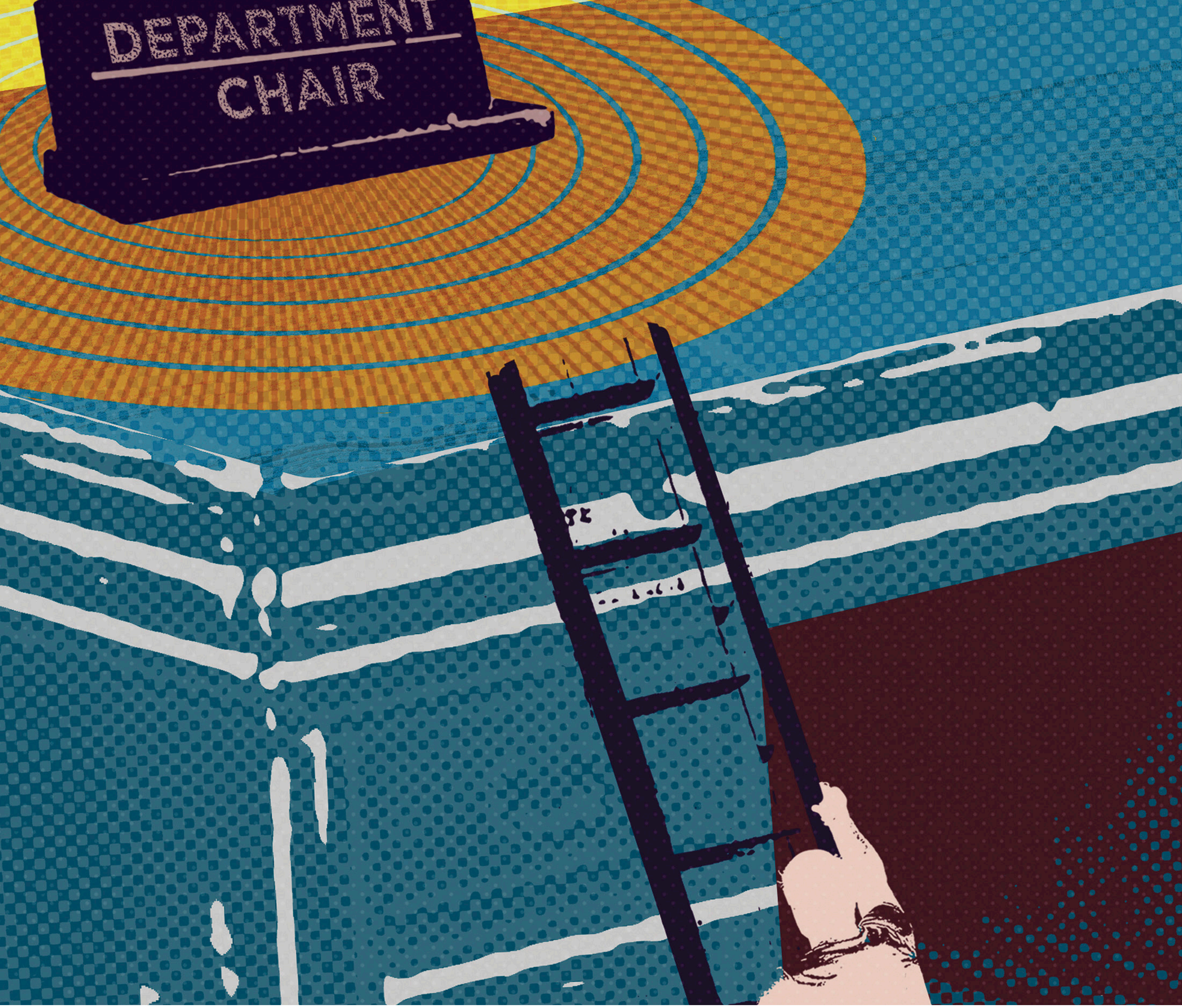

ADOLFO VALLE FOR THE CHRONICLE

7 Questions for Would-Be Chairs

By ROB JENKINS

One characteristic that distinguishes academics from professionals in the corporate world is the former don't necessarily aspire to climb the management ladder. Many professors — perhaps most, and especially the tenured — are content to spend their lives focusing on teaching and research, with no desire to become a department chair or dean.

That said, some faculty members do want to scale the ladder of academic administration, the first rung of which is usually department chair. Others may not have pursued a management job but nevertheless find it extended to them. And still others may feel some obligation to "take a turn" at the helm, for the good of their department or simply to share the burden. Professors in all three of those groups, at some point, face the same dilemma: "Should I do this, or not?"

That question, by itself, is far too general and therefore probably unanswerable. Deciding whether a management gig is best for your career — and for you personally — will require a great deal of reflection and self-assessment. Here are seven questions you should be asking yourself before you start the climb.

Why would I do this? Exploring our own motives can be challenging, but before you seek or accept the role of department chair, it's important that you understand exactly why you want to do it.

Good reasons abound: You believe you have the organizational and people skills to be successful as a middle manager; you feel an obligation to your colleagues or the institution; you aspire to a higher level of administration; you're starting to burn out from years of teaching and change seems attractive; you could use the extra money (assuming there is any).

There's nothing inherently wrong with any of those reasons. Indeed, most faculty members who go into administration would probably cite all of them to some degree. Still, it's vital that you are honest enough with yourself to understand your primary motivations. Only then can you answer the questions that follow.

Am I going to miss the classroom? Not everyone who goes into higher education does so because they enjoy teaching — but most of us do. Especially at community colleges, small liberal-arts colleges, and other teaching-focused institutions, the opportunity to work with students in the classroom is the main reason we get up and go to work every day.

How much chairs get to teach — or have to teach, depending on your perspective — varies widely by institution.

> You cannot continue your former relationships while serving as chair. No more going out to lunch with your BFFs.

On some campuses, chairs teach nearly a full load, with maybe a course or two of release time in exchange for fulfilling their managerial responsibilities. On other campuses, department heads are more like associate deans and don't teach at all. Instead they have other duties, like fund raising or community outreach, in addition to the usual administrative tasks. Most chairs are still considered teaching faculty and teach perhaps a course or two each year.

So find out how much you would be teaching if you took the job. And if the answer is "not much," then your next question should be, "Am I OK with that?"

Will I mind being chained to a desk? If you've never been an administrator before, you might not realize just how much of a desk job it is. In fact, perhaps the biggest difference between the life of a regular faculty member and that of a chair is that, outside of class times and office hours, the former has much more freedom. When faculty members are done with their responsibilities for the day, they can just leave campus. Often, they can even structure their schedules to spend entire days working from home.

Most department heads can't do that. Barring meetings and so forth (we'll get to those in a moment), one of the chair's main jobs is simply to sit in that office from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. every day — just in case you are needed. It doesn't matter if anyone comes by, or if there's anything to do. You just have to be there.

How much do I hate meetings? No conversation among professors would be complete without some snide reference to the boring and interminable meetings that are so much a part of academic life. Yet most faculty members don't know the half of it.

Other than being available during business hours, a chair's other main obligation is to attend meetings on behalf of the department. Countless meetings. All kinds of meetings. Large meetings and small meetings, important meetings and pointless meetings (sadly, more of the latter than the former). And whether you enjoy those meetings or not, you pretty much have to be there, because otherwise your department's interests won't be represented. Sometimes you can farm out the responsibility, but mostly you just have to go yourself. One of your biggest challenges as chair will be juggling all of those meetings with your other duties, such as preparing reports, scheduling classes, evaluating faculty members — and attending still more meetings.

If the prospect of endless meetings fills you with revulsion, then this might not be the job for you.

How much do I value my work friendships? Another stark reality of becoming chair is that you can no longer be friends with other faculty members in the department. Of course you can still be friendly with them. And you probably do want to remain "friends" on some level, especially if you ever intend to return to the faculty full-time. (You certainly don't want to be enemies.)

But you cannot continue your former relationships while serving as chair. No more going out to lunch with your BFFs. No more hanging out in their offices shooting the bull. That sort of behavior will quickly be interpreted as showing favoritism — it's one of the surest ways to sow discord in a department. The first time one of your "friends" gets a plum committee assignment or a better annual evaluation than someone else will, at the very least, open you up to accusations of unequal treatment. Avoid that at all costs.

Yes, you can still have friends at work. You'll just have to find them outside your department — perhaps among the other chairs or people at the same level in student affairs. Your friends can't be people who report to you or over whom you might conceivably exercise any authority. If that's a problem — if you have friendships you value too highly in your department to give up — you might not want to be chair.

Where do I see myself going from here? Having some idea what you plan to do after your term as chair ends isn't essential but it can help determine how you behave while in that position.

I've always believed that a chair's primary duty is to support faculty members. That often means standing up for them, and for their interests, in the face of opposition — from above as well as below. If you plan to return to faculty life once you leave the chair, having a reputation as someone who had your colleagues' backs can certainly be advantageous. You will likely be accepted back into the fold with open arms.

Frankly, though, if you hope to keep moving up — to be a dean one day, or eventually a provost or a president — then a pro-faculty mind-set might be a political liability. Whether or not that's a good thing, it's simply a reality to keep in mind at many institutions. To be fair, it's probably possible to be pro-faculty and still navigate the political waters of upper-level administration, if you're savvy enough. But you should certainly be thinking about what kinds of compromises you might have to make as you climb the administrative ladder before you set your foot on the first rung.

Are the money and perks worth it? Let's be honest: At most institutions, the department chair's job doesn't come with a huge raise, if it comes with a raise at all. My first job as chair offered only release time from teaching — no salary bump. And even if you do get a raise, it might not be much more than you could make by teaching in the summer.

That said, most chairs do make more than regular faculty members, and that can be a powerful motivating factor. The position might also come with other perks, such as a nicer office, an administrative assistant, and a certain amount of respect (or at least deference).

Your answers to the other six questions here must be taken into account before you answer this one. If you hate everything about the chair's job — being chained to a desk, attending interminable meetings, giving up some of your best friends — will that be offset by an extra $10,000 a year or so (if you're lucky)? If you're being honest with yourself, the answer is probably no — unless you really need the money, to the point that you're willing to put up with a less-than-optimal work life.

Nothing I've said here is intended to discourage people from becoming department chairs. Goodness knows, we need good people in those jobs; they're the ones who essentially run the institution. Moreover, there are plenty of good things about being a chair. If you do the job well, you can have a tremendously positive impact on the lives of faculty and students alike. For that matter, you might not have found anything I talked about above particularly objectionable: "Meetings? Sitting at a desk? I can do that."

If so, and if you think you have something to offer, then by all means, apply for the job — or accept the position that's been offered. Just be sure you know what you're getting into.

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ISTOCK

To Chair or Not to Chair?

By JERLANDO F.L. JACKSON

EVERY SPRING, a set of little-known deliberations — formal and informal — play out in many an academic department about who should serve as the next chair. The scope of the discussions varies based on the institutional process. Some departments conduct a national search to select a full-time chair, while others take an internal "it's your turn" approach. The latter is how I ended up as chair.

The summer before starting my 19th year on the faculty, I was immersed fully in growing my research laboratory — managing a variety of projects, replacing and training new staff, starting a national study, outlining a book. Not to mention, I was teaching classes, advising graduate students, supervising dissertations, serving on committees. In short: I was already busy.

When I heard the words, "Would you consider being chair next year?," all sorts of thoughts ran through my head:

- A nearly audible "Whyyyyyyyy meeeeeeeeeee?"
- "No way. I am living my 'academic best life'!"
- "I thought someone was already pegged for this?"
- "Do I have to quit my research?"
- And, "There is no way in the world that I can do it and run my lab."

I had recurring visions of being chained to a desk.

Once my initial panic subsided, I realized that my colleagues' request was not unreasonable. After all, I'd been in the department for 18 years; it was natural my name would come up eventually in the who-should-serve-next debate.

Regardless of the chair-selection process, the choice has important implications for the department. Just as students consider whether to remain in courses or drop them, faculty members must consider the many reasons they should — or shouldn't — be department chair. The process is both introspective and long-range, requiring you to consider how your skill set and your career trajectory align with the chair's role.

Why might a faculty member aspire to be chair? Perhaps it represents a natural progression of service after you chaired the largest, most important committee in the department. Alternatively, maybe your research ideas have ebbed and you're looking to make a different, yet important, contribution to the department. Possibly, a bump in pay and a reduced teaching load seem attractive in return for assuming the chair's job. And let's not forget the "unthinkable." You actually might aspire to a senior academic leadership role, such as dean, provost, or president, and view the chair's position as your first step up the administrative-career ladder.

In my own case, while I didn't seek the job, I realized that my colleagues saw value in my taking a turn. So I started to consider what it would mean for me, my lab, and for the department if I became chair.

I turned my attention to the most important question: Can I do this job well? Seeking an answer, I initiated a two-week discovery phase. First I talked with my family and my laboratory staff, all of whom would be affected in myriad unknown ways if I said yes. Next I spoke with former chairs, the department's office manager, staff members in the dean's office, and colleagues who headed departments at other institutions to gain insights into the role, function, and responsibilities of the position.

My discovery phase revealed seven key considerations that guided my own decision-making process. I offer the seven criteria here to help other faculty members faced with their own "to chair or not to chair" conundrum:

- **Nature of the appointment.** What percentage of time will you be expected to devote to the department-chair role? For example, is it a 50-percent appointment? Does the position come with summer duties, and how does the summer appointment differ from the academic year? Does the post include any course-release time from teaching? Is the chair's job a full-time position, disguised as a part-time one? How many years will your term last? Is it a one-time stint?

- **Workflow.** This involves the annual budgeting process and other paperwork duties. How much of the workflow is handled automatically by the department's support staff? How much is specific to — and/or initiated by — the department chair?

> You actually might aspire to a senior academic leadership role, and view the chair's position as your first step up the administrative-career ladder.

- **Job benefits.** What benefits come with the position? A temporary boost in your base salary? An expense account? Do you have access to staff support to help you manage the increased demands on your schedule, and student-research assistants to enable you to maintain your research activity? Are there other forms of support provided for the chair, such as leadership coaching or professional-development opportunities?

- **Responsibilities and commitments.** What are the daily and weekly schedules of the department chair? Are there "desk time" expectations for the job — meaning set hours in which you must be in the department office? What established and regularly scheduled meetings — committees and administrative councils — will require your attendance? What parts of the department chair's schedule are inflexible?

- **Major projects.** What are the known big-ticket items — hiring, retirements, program certifications, accreditation, budget reductions, curriculum overhaul — on the agenda during your stint as chair for the next three-to-five years?

- **Office environment.** Who really runs the department? Will the regular staff members be open to your work style and approach? Or will you have to acquiesce to their approach?

- **Documents to review.** What materials are essential to read during your discovery phase? Items you might want to study: policies and procedures, state-education regulations, campus handbooks, reports, and (definitely) budget reports and forecasts.

After I took some time to consider all of that information, I came to two main conclusions about my own foray into administrative duties.

First, the ingredients for me doing the job well were in place. Namely, my experience leading an externally funded unit on the campus, my knowledge of the budgeting process, my familiarity with the university and its key players, and my 18 years of lived experience as a faculty member here bode well for me in the position. Also, I would have plenty of help in both the department and my laboratory. The department has a highly skilled and knowledgeable support staff. Likewise, the staff members in my lab are experienced enough to manage commitments even if I am less available.

Second, to be honest, I came up with more reasons to say no than to say yes. All of those reasons were completely self-serving. Until being posed the question, research was the focus of my career, and a stint as department chair was not going to help me advance my scholarly agenda. It was not going to help me write a book, finish my various studies, apply for new research grants, or organize international research gatherings.

In spite of the preponderance of evidence pushing me toward no, I said yes. And I did so for one reason alone: to be a good departmental citizen.

Collegiality is only a reality when all members of a department share in carrying out its responsibilities and obligations. For 18 years, someone other than me served as the chief caretaker of the department — ensuring that my fellow faculty members and I had the freedom to follow our intellectual interests. It is unfair when only "some" colleagues sacrifice time away from their own interests for the greater good.

The idea of not taking my turn in this crucial role, purely because of its inconvenience to my career, made me uncomfortable.

Consequently, I put my "academic best life" on pause to be a good departmental citizen. Now that I have been in the role for just shy of a year, it reinforces the reason I said yes. In order to approach the position with the appropriate temperament, any motivation other than being a good citizen would have yielded disappointment as the role involves a daily balancing of the interests of your department against institutional priorities.

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Administration Can Be a Calling

For some of us, at a certain stage of our careers, the chair's job is no longer something to dread or apologize for. It's a "scholarly gift" we give to our colleagues.

By KEVIN DETTMAR

TIM FOLEY FOR THE CHRONICLE

Editor's note: This excerpt from a new book, How to Chair a Department, *has been adapted and published with permission from Johns Hopkins University Press.*

ACADEME RUNS on a secret economy of gifts. It's helpful to understand this via Marcel Mauss whose groundbreaking ethnography has influenced all modern thinking about the giving and receiving of gifts since it was published in 1925. His signal claim is that there is no such thing as a free gift:

It is indeed ownership that one obtains with the gift that one receives. But it is ownership of a certain kind. … It is ownership and possession, a pledge and something hired out, a thing sold and bought, and at the same time deposited, mandated, and bequeathed in order to be passed on to another. For it is only given you on condition that you make use of it for another or pass it on to a third person, the "distant partner."

Following Mauss's insight that "a gift is received 'with a burden attached,'" I want to sketch out what I'll call the "scholarly gift." An "ordinary" gift puts me under obligation to repay the giver; the title of the first subsection of Mauss's introduction is "The Gift, and Especially the Obligation to Return It." But scholarly gifts are different. These are the gifts we receive from those "above" us in the profession, whether they are of higher rank, have more seniority or greater professional stature, or are associated with a more prestigious institution. That, in part, is what makes the gift of a letter of recommendation, for instance, so valuable.

Here's the paradox: Although I'm deeply grateful for such gifts, there's no way I can repay them directly because my "coin" is no good in their realm. The scholarly gift is characterized by a dynamic of asymmetrical reciprocity: An ethical obligation to give back is combined with a structural inability to repay directly those I owe.

How, then, do we even begin to pay back these scholarly gifts? The answer, in short, is that we turn around and pay them down the line: Pay them to younger or less well-situated scholars we are in a position to help. Which is to say that the profession runs, albeit secretly, on an intergenerational economy of debt and indebtedness, an exchange of quiet acts of professional courtesy and generosity. And this deep well of debt and indebtedness is, in the final analysis, a good rather than a bad thing.

The profession runs, albeit secretly, on an intergenerational economy of debt and indebtedness, an exchange of quiet acts of professional courtesy and generosity.

It's important, for my purposes, to distinguish the gift of the mentor from the gift of the peer or colleague. We talk about and understand collegiality — even if we're often not very good at practicing it. Collegiality, however, is an example of symmetrical reciprocity, whereas the scholarly gift is characterized by asymmetrical reciprocity. And this exchange of gifts between unequals remains undiscussed.

I'm talking not primarily about generosity toward students — crucial though that is — but about generosity toward peers and colleagues (although at the upper end of the spectrum, of course, the boundary between graduate student and colleague is both fuzzy and fluid).

Perhaps it's more useful to differentiate the kind of generosity that is more or less obligatory, implicitly a condition of employment (serving on dissertation committees, writing letters of recommendation when asked), from what we might call entrepreneurial generosity, a professional generosity that actively searches for colleagues to invest in. It's a question, perhaps, of devoting our scholarly capital to those who have less, with the understanding that they'll at some point turn around and make that same investment in others.

When it comes to the gifts we've received from our mentors in the profession, we must "pay them forward" because there's no way for us to pay them back. We can do this in many ways:

- writing letters of recommendation.
- agreeing to do outside tenure reviews.
- reading the manuscripts of colleagues, both for colleagues we know and for journals and presses.
- providing book reviews.
- serving in scholarly organizations.
- contributing to collective publishing projects that don't immediately or obviously burnish our scholarly reputations.
- chairing our departments.

One of the most famous invocations of the gift in the Western tradition is Paul's statement in the book of Romans: "The free gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord." The Greek word for "free gift" in that passage is "charisma." To the extent that we have any charisma, any star cachet, we need to turn it into a gift.

This is the unpaid labor by which our profession remains professional. And just like most of our scholarly work, these works of generosity are largely done when we're off the clock at night, on weekends, during unpaid summer months. What are the institutional, structural rewards for this service? Well they're just awful, of course — but perhaps that's not the point.

For some of us, at a certain stage of our careers, administrative work is no longer something to dread or to apologize for. For some of us, serving as chair of a department or dean of a college comes unbidden as a second, midcareer calling. Too often, perhaps, it calls us away from the work we were destined to do, and those tend to be the stories we hear. But sometimes, taking on administrative duties is precisely the culmination and fulfillment of that scholarly work, allowing us to recognize our past as prologue for the first time.

We don't talk enough about the fact that, besides representing an obligation or a noble sacrifice, academic administration can be a calling; that the work can be incredibly rewarding instead of draining or distracting; that while it requires training and accomplishment as a scholar to qualify for such an appointment, success in it relies on a set of gifts that, for the most part, have nothing to do with those who sent us off to graduate school in the first place.

Administration is a category of academic work that faculty-reward systems refuse to recognize adequately. Some institutions offer department heads a small additional stipend; some reduce the chair's teaching load. Some do both. But these never fully compensate for the additional work; and tenure-and-promotion systems may recognize the chair's service but at a discount. We're taught from early on how to value our accomplishments as scholars, and we choose mentors whose research has distinguished them in their fields. At most prestigious colleges and universities, good teaching alone won't suffice to establish a distinguished career, but every institution worth its salt at least professes to care about teaching and very publicly rewards it. It's easy enough, then, to feel good about being a good teacher, and it's certainly in that guise that an often-hostile public likes us best.

But academic administration is abject: It requires gifts that one apologizes for possessing. I probably feel that way more acutely than most owing to the particulars of my situation. I didn't get my current position at midcareer because my name was on everyone's lips and my books in everyone's offices. No, I snuck in through the servant's entrance as a department chair.

For some of us, serving as chair of a department or dean of a college comes unbidden as a second, midcareer calling.

Being good at academic administration paradoxically makes one feel bad about oneself. We scholars tend to function, unconsciously, with a spurious binary in place: Those who can (teach, research, write), do; those who can't, or can no longer, chair. Surely this is wrong. What I'm advocating here is not a prescription for every Ph.D. It's a path for only some of us.

But for those few — having taught well, published articles and papers and books, and created a scholarly identity — the next challenge and source of career fulfillment lies in taking on the job of hiring and mentoring younger scholars and devoting our experience to the task of clearing obstacles for them so that they might enjoy the same rewards and fulfillment as scholars and teachers that we have.

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SECTION 2

The Chair's Job: Tools and Advice

JULIE DELTON FOR THE CHRONICLE

10 Ways to Rebuild Department Culture

No one seems happy with the level of connection at work after two years of Covid. So how can chairs start repairing the damage?

By TRISALYN NELSON

Has Covid-19 irrevocably changed the culture of academic departments? It certainly feels that way. For more than two years, we've faced restrictions that required remote and hybrid work. People have moved, changed child care, and become comfortable working from home. Yet no one seems happy with the level of connection we are experiencing at work.

It is hard to build connections between colleagues when no one is around the office. Restoring department culture right now can feel like an exercise in futility.

The culture of a workplace matters. A healthy work culture is one in which people feel trusted and respected. They believe that their needs are a priority. Culture is even more significant than compensation in predicting employee turnover. In academic departments, culture is critical to attracting and retaining excellent faculty, staff, and students. A positive culture is also central to succeeding with goals that aim to enhance diversity, equity, and inclusion. Everyone needs to be comfortable coming to the office, attending meetings, and raising their voices. Whatever the goal, you will need a constructive culture in the department to achieve it.

Building academic culture has always required sustained and intentional effort, but Covid has made the task more complicated than ever. Nowadays, with fewer restrictions from federal agencies like the CDC, our responses to living and working in a world with Covid are more individualized. Some people are happy to meet in groups and travel, while others prefer to continue keeping their Covid bubbles small. Meanwhile, remote work and hybrid meetings are very likely here to stay. People expect — and many need — more flexibility in where and when they work.

So where does that leave the workplace culture of academic departments? In need of some serious brainstorming — especially among chairs and other academic leaders. In what follows, I outline some ideas to start the conversation.

Anything is better than nothing. At this point, what you do to rebuild work relationships and campus culture is less important than that you *do something*. People in the workplace are looking for a sign that leadership is thinking of them and that they are valued as people rather than just as workers. With that in mind, don't aim for perfection. Just act. In my department, we have started a cookies-in-the-courtyard hour: Once a week someone bakes and brings in a container of sweets. Some weeks attendance is low, but the idea that an activity is organized and that there is an opportunity to connect with others bolsters spirits within the department. It is a sign that people in the workplace care and are taking the time to organize ways to bring people together.

Plan some activities that don't require a gathering. Not everyone is comfortable getting together in person. Covid cases nationally are falling (at the moment) but even if/when they are on the rise again, an unwillingness to attend a departmentwide event doesn't mean that people are satisfied with the level of human connection they are feeling at work. As chair, you can look for ways to connect people without an in-person meeting. For example, our department links people through a program called "care buddies" — two people are anonymously connected with the goal of doing thoughtful things for each other throughout the year. A kind note or a cookie in a mailbox is all that is required. Opting into the care-buddy program means that someone is thinking of you. Someone cares. That kind of activity doesn't appeal to everyone, so it is important to make it optional.

Avoid mandatory fun. No one likes to be told what to do. While you might wish that all faculty members would engage in your culture-building efforts, they won't. People should never feel as if their job or advancement requires them to show up to social events. Be particularly cognizant of how social demands may feel to staff members and contingent faculty members, who are stretched thin and often carrying heavy loads because of employee shortages. They don't want to be excluded. By all means, extend an invitation to all. But some employees prefer to go home and unwind after a long work day without the pressure of having to "put in an appearance" at a mandatory social event. It should be OK to decline the invitation.

Set aside a fixed time to meet with colleagues. This is my second stint as department chair. One thing I have noticed in this position is that people value access. They just want to know they can get a few minutes to talk when and if they need it. As chair, if you make time, even if no one takes you up on it, people will appreciate it. Try to schedule a regular coffee-with-the-chair hour or weekly "office hours" for faculty members to call or drop by. Some days no one will visit, and you will end up using the time to answer email. Chances are, people will appreciate the offer because it signals access. They have a mechanism to voice their concerns and needs.

Consider whether an event will inadvertently exclude anyone. A classic example is the late-afternoon happy hour that occurs just as parents need to be heading out to pick up their children from school or day care. That doesn't mean you can never organize a late-afternoon event; just make sure it's not the only option. People have full lives and many responsibilities and it is helpful if the majority of events occur at times and places that (a) accommodate most members of the department and (b) feature activities that fit most people's lives. Also, if you notice that certain groups of people aren't participating in your culture-building efforts, think about organizing something that might be particularly meaningful to them (and everyone else). One of the most successful events I've held as chair was a Lunar New Year celebration. Noticing that most of our international students — many of whom were Chinese — were not attending departmental activities, we created an event that the international students were excited to help plan and run.

Improve your virtual meet-ups. Technology for remote and hybrid meetings has come a long way during the pandemic. If your meetings are failing to create a connection between online and in-person participants, consider if there is a technological solution that can help.

Amplifying the success of individual members, or of the department as a whole, can build culture.

Use existing meetings to strengthen relationships. Lack of time is a key barrier to building department culture. Rather than creating a bunch of new events, see if you can borrow a few minutes from (or add to) existing meetings for culture-building. For example, set aside 10 minutes of each faculty meeting for a department member to share a research or teaching effort they are passionate about.

Connect about the work. It is amazing how little opportunity there is within an academic unit — especially one that is interdisciplinary and diverse — for members to learn about one another's research. Little time is set aside to learn what people are up to in their writing and scholarship. Department seminars and retreats can be an avenue for people to share their work, interact, and build connections.

Celebrate success. Amplifying the success of individual members, or of the department as a whole, can build culture. It's a way to make people feel seen and appreciated. Formal announcements at award ceremonies or in campus newsletters are of course important. But recognition can be as simple as mentioning a colleague's success in a group setting or sending out an email acknowledging someone's latest article, teaching award, or book contract. If you notice people who are infrequently honored by the department — such as staff members and adjuncts — but deserve recognition, make up your own awards. To improve staff culture we started a Chair's Golden Globe award (I am a geographer after all) and each semester honored a staff member at a faculty meeting.

Word of warning: Make unpredictability part of the equation. This past summer, I had one goal: See my friend Amy. We tried four times, and each time we had to cancel our plans because of a Covid case or scare. This is the world we live in. But just because you may have to cancel your culture-building plans doesn't mean you should quit making them. In fact, just the opposite: Keep making plans! Accept the possibility that your best-laid plans could end up cancelled, and avoid nonrefundable investments in food or venues.

As academics, we like our independence. But to do our best work, we need other academics. The role of the chair is to recreate a space for people to make meaningful connections surrounding their work and find common ground — which leads to empathy and mutual respect. After a period of so much isolation and fracture, we all need to feel like a valuable part of our academic homes.

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ISTOCK

5 Tips on Surviving Your First Year as a Department Head

By ROB KRAMER and PETER J. MUCHA

ROUGHLY HALF of the people you meet after being named department chair will start the conversation with "Congratulations!" But an occasional smirk makes it feel as if many are saying, "Condolences." (The other half actually start the conversation with some variant of "Condolences.") And you haven't even officially started yet.

As a first-time chair, you are armed with only peripheral leadership experience, with whatever supportive relationships exist in the department, and with a faculty hungry (or maybe reluctant?) for more, better, different, or even status-quo guidance.

Your job starts the moment the appointment is announced. Once the soon-to-be-ex chair begins jettisoning work onto your desk, foot traffic by your office will increase rapidly, and your calendar will fill with more and more meeting requests. The dean wants to start discussing your "new strategic plan." The office manager is either threatening to quit or telling you about how other staff members are disgruntled and threatening to quit. Good times?

At the University of North Carolina's Institute for the Arts and Humanities, we have a nine-month program for new and reappointed department chairs. Affectionately referred to as "chairapy," our chairs-leadership program organizes monthly meetings in a confidential setting throughout the academic year to help chairs process challenges, successes, bewilderments, frustrations, and ideas with colleagues who are experiencing much of the same. In the course of running this program, we have learned a lot about what to do, what not to do, when to take chances, and when to back off. Here are some of our collected highlights for surviving your first year as chair.

You no longer have peers in your department. Relationship dynamics get off kilter when you assume the role of chair. Close colleagues may think they can make special requests. Some faculty members with whom you had little or no relationship suddenly want to become your best buddy. Your "leadership team" (e.g., associate chair and perhaps the department's various directors of graduate studies, undergraduate studies, research) may make your life easier, or tougher.

One thing is certain: You immediately become the most popular person at the dance.

You can prepare for the changing dynamics. Don't assume that colleagues who used to keep your comments confidential will still do so. Not to say you should be suspicious of everyone — just mind what you share. The rumor mill is as strong in academe as it was in middle school.

A helpful strategy is to set expectations upfront. Talk to your colleagues, either in small groups (full professors, associate professors, lecturers, etc.) and/or at a departmentwide meeting. Be careful not to show favoritism, even to that one professor who has been your closest colleague. People are looking for reasons to either support you or point out your mistakes. Stay on the high-integrity side of the fence.

You suddenly serve a lot of different audiences. Your formal appointment might be at the will of the dean, but effectively you have many faculty constituents who can help make things work in the department or torpedo your efforts.

This can be one of the trickiest lines to walk as chair. People in the department expect you to remain "of the faculty" and be a good advocate for them to the dean's office. The dean expects you to be a good foot soldier and not make his or her life any more complex than it already is. Oh, you need to make sure that students, parents, and staff members, too, are kept satisfied. And don't forget about your donors and alumni.

Chairs are notoriously stuck in the middle, serving everyone in all directions. That's why the job may be the toughest in higher education. Allegiances and alliances can make you feel as if you're stuck in a live version of *Game of Thrones*.

Don't step too far one way or the other — at the risk of getting your head lopped off. Political savvy is crucial as chair. Listen well.

Really well. Understand people's needs, concerns, dreams, and desires. Make sure they feel heard and seen. Then rouse your courage and set healthy, appropriate boundaries — in all directions. Better to do that early than try to play catch-up after everyone has figured how to run roughshod over you.

One solution: Find your "new" community. It may be with other chairs on the campus, with trusted colleagues at other institutions, or with people outside of the workplace. Having a safe space where you can talk openly about the stresses and challenges of the job is cathartic, given its intensity, and will help you avoid isolation and loneliness — two easy traps of the role.

> Allegiances and alliances can make you feel as if you're stuck in a live version of *Game of Thrones*.

"It's the budget, stupid." Remember what your constituents care about most: money. They want to know how the department will pay for faculty lines, graduate students, curriculum needs, copier machines, IT equipment, pencils.

Perhaps the most important thing to start learning quickly is how your department's budget works, how it fits into the institution's financial structures and plans, and how much money you will have to work with.

Manage your time and your focus. You can find a wealth of literature preaching productivity strategies (including many we employ in our chairapy program). Whatever methodology you subscribe to, stay aware of the need to maintain your own scholarship.

The chair's job is inherently temporary. Whether you're in the role for a few years or 10, you have a limited time to achieve your goals. Why did you agree to do it in the first place? What are you aiming to accomplish? Be skeptical whether every "emergency" that comes across your desk actually merits that label (actual "emergencies" in, say, a math department are, thankfully, few and far between). Give your time and energy to your important, long-term goals as chair.

And if your long-term goals include your own research — if they don't, why not? — do not hesitate to block out time in your calendar to work on them.

You're no good to anyone if you don't take care of yourself. An avalanche of meetings and demands will try to overwhelm your personal life and your physical well-being, in quite negative ways if you are not careful. Weight gain in the first year as chair may rival that of the "freshman 15" (as one of us unfortunately experienced firsthand).

If you set the email auto-response when you are traveling (whether for work or vacation), stick to it. You may be surprised how many problems take care of themselves among people who learn that you are unavailable to fix them right away.

Know who the important people in your life are and make commitments early to them — and "them" can absolutely include yourself. We know one chair who has a quiet spot she goes to every day and sits for about 30 minutes as a way to clear her head and refresh. Another chair makes weekends nonnegotiable family time. Find an approach that works for you, and for them.

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ISTOCK

How to Be a Radically Open Department Head

By **MICHAEL J. BUGEJA**

SOME PROFESSORS go into administration as a career choice, scaling institutional ladders. Some are coerced into serving temporarily as department chair because of rotating-leadership rules. And some professors, like me, do it because we grew weary of being acted upon by supervisors.

You'll find two types of administrators in that third group:

- Those who wreak havoc, doing unto others as they had done to them — e.g., playing favorites, concealing budgets, excluding critics from participation.
- Those who treat everyone as they always wished to be treated.

In my 14 years as director of the journalism and communication school at Iowa State University, I sought to avoid that first camp and situate myself squarely in the second. Some of the ways you do that as a leader are obvious: Know institutional policies back to front, especially the faculty handbook; make sure everything you do and propose is in compliance; seek broad input before you adopt any new practice.

But one of my guiding principles as an administrator was not so obvious: Startle everyone with openness.

Administrators talk a lot about "transparency." But for that word to be more than jargon, you have to live by it and actively promote it. As a faculty member, I was less than satisfied with the candor of my supervisors. The absence of transparency implied the presence of incompetence. I wanted to be a different sort of leader.

What follows are my 10 best practices for how to be a "radically" open administrator who treats people the way you would like to be treated.

No bombshells at faculty meetings. As a professor, I loathed faculty meetings. Some administrators scheduled them weekly — then used the time to tell us what they had in store for us and called it "consultative governance." Certain faculty members would counter by maximizing the amount of discussion, springing motions on everyone, and sowing discord for the sheer fun of it.

Why so many meetings, anyway? A properly run department or school can operate on one two-hour faculty meeting a month. Occasionally — say, during searches or budget issues — an additional meeting might be necessary. But that should be the exception.

And no surprises should be the rule.

Here's how: Two weeks in advance of a scheduled meeting, put out a call via email for agenda items. Give people a week to respond. That way, you can send faculty members a final agenda before the meeting, allowing everyone time to read through the main motions and attachments.

Another way to avoid surprises: Require every motion to be spelled out in writing and advanced by a committee before it is put to a departmental vote. If faculty members have discussion items they want on the agenda, they either go under "new business" (items requiring an eventual vote) or "other business" (items not requiring a vote).

No special privileges for administrators. We call them "faculty meetings" for a reason. As a chair or a school director, you have a faculty title — you are a professor among professors. If you want to place a motion on the agenda, go through the same process as everyone else.

Sure, you have to make difficult decisions as chair or director, but that does not entitle you to make them without faculty input. Especially when a particular decision is likely to be unpopular or divisive, potentially affecting morale, you don't have to make the call alone.

Instead: Create a standing advisory committee to guide you. As a component of shared governance, an advisory committee can ease tensions, so long as you don't fill it with your friends. Your advisory panel could include administrative colleagues, such as an associate chair or a budget officer, but also should have professors chosen by faculty vote, such as chairs of standing committees (especially promotion-and-tenure). Be inclusive: Add an assistant professor or a staff member on a rotating basis.

Post meeting agendas on hallway bulletin boards. So much committee work is digital. We get notices about action items and agendas and often overlook them in the email tsunami that defines our workday. Why not post agendas where everyone can see them?

Cork boards have power in academe. They command attention. You pass by them regularly. Students are seen reading the postings and later question you about them. Bulletin boards are symbols of shared governance. So pin things there proudly, including clippings about faculty, student, or departmental honors.

Recognize faculty achievements, commensurate with their scope. In the course of my career, I remember chairs and directors who opted to pick and choose which faculty accomplishments to tout and which to ignore. That always undermined morale. Yet you risk consuming a lot of meeting time if you try to announce every faculty achievement, no matter how minor.

So use the "applause test" to decide which ones to announce. That is: If the achievement would merit applause, mention it in a faculty meeting. When a professor wins a major award, that merits applause. Getting a paper published does not.

I'm not suggesting that lesser achievements be ignored. Instead, establish a new vehicle for faculty and staff members to self-report their achievements — whether it's research, publications, grants, teaching innovations, service contributions, and internal and external awards. Every month, compile all of that good work into a regular email blast that goes out to the entire department as well as to campus administrators, alumni, and donors.

Feature the really significant ones on the department or program's website. Better still, post each monthly email on the website as a matter of record (here is how we do it).

Post course and committee assignments before the start of each semester. If a member of the department has received release time from teaching in order to take on some administrative duties, that creates a workload issue for those who have to cover for that faculty member. By sharing such assignments publicly, everyone in a department knows what everyone else is up to.

This is also a good way to monitor whether committee assignments are being shared fairly. It is important to assess that each semester so as not to overload anyone with service commitments, especially assistant professors who need to focus on research for promotion.

Organize a roundtable for junior scholars. All too often, assistant professors are left out of departmental decisions, usually when it comes to issues of tenure and promotion — a topic continuously on their minds. Junior professors need a committee of their own.

Call it a roundtable and schedule monthly meetings, perhaps on the same day as a full-faculty meeting. The roundtable's purpose should be associated primarily with promotion, but you also can deal with teaching and advising issues, as appropriate. Invite administrators and faculty members from across the campus to attend and discuss career advancement or share best practices for scholarship and grants.

> As a chair or a school director, you have a faculty title — you are a professor among professors.

The beauty of this approach is its effectiveness. Assistant professors share methodologies and cohere as a cohort. They learn indirectly about the productivity of peers. Those who "graduate" from the group and later become members of the tenure committee already know the quality of colleagues' work.

Be open about salaries, and resist salary compression. An open hiring process is a vital part of shared governance. Once the department gets the go-ahead for a new faculty line, professors should have a significant role in deciding the focus of the job and hiring someone to fill it. They should even help in negotiating the final offer.

One of the biggest issues in any search is salary range. Ideally, the range for a new position should not create compression — i.e., the new tenure-track hire is paid significantly more than tenured professors in the same department — except in certain situations, such as an endowed professorship financed by a donor.

So, for example, if assistant-professor salaries in your department average $65,000, the starting salary for a new hire should be $60,000 to $63,000. When it is time to offer the job to your top choice, invite the search committee to be involved. Put the prospect on speaker phone and disclose that colleagues are in the room. Make the atmosphere celebratory. Share the starting salary, usually the advertised maximum. State that there is no room to negotiate a higher amount. If asked, remind the applicant that you take salary compression seriously and that he or she will appreciate the policy once hired.

Open your budget books. Speaking of money, allow faculty and staff members to see how funds are spent. Of course you can't disclose everything (donor information, for example, must remain private) but be prepared to answer questions about expenditures as openly as you can.

There's a plus side to that. Professors will see that most of the budget — often as much as 90 percent — goes to salaries. The rest underwrites things like travel, supplies, and scholarships. It will become very clear that there are no fabled hidden pots of gold in your budget.

Make sure everyone knows how raises are awarded. Perhaps nothing is as potentially explosive as who gets which percentage raise and how that is determined. Create a process for that, too.

Here's a formula: With faculty input, devise a template that evaluates contributions in teaching, research and service on a five-point scale. Then calculate an "overall" score — for example: teaching 4.6; research 4.2; service 4.7; overall, 4.5. Use that figure, multiplied by the percentage increase your department received for salaries, to determine the faculty member's raise.

Whatever is left over can be used to reward merit or deal with salary compression. Be candid about those types of raises, too.

Share your department's metrics online. Use your program's public website to post information about its enrollment, time to degree, postgraduation employment, scholarships, paid versus unpaid internships, and other statistics by which the public can judge your performance. Update those metrics annually.

Yes, such disclosures might mean you are publicizing your weaknesses, but that alone can inspire change and renewed focus.

Last word about radical transparency: If you institute or request it, expect some blowback. Upper administrators may object or even forbid it. Some professors may fight it because they prefer favoritism or cliques. However, once instituted, and accepted as standard operating procedure, your department or school can become a model of shared governance.

That is what higher education is rumored to be about.

Michael J. Bugeja is a professor at the Greenlee School of Journalism and Communication at Iowa State University.

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How One University Involved Department Chairs to Raise Retention Rates

These four strategies foster student success.

By ALLISON CALHOUN-BROWN

This essay is excerpted from a Chronicle *special report, "Recruiting and Retaining Students in a Challenging Market," available in the Chronicle Store.*

COLLEGES CAN do many things at the institutional level to improve student success, such as expand academic support, provide students with financial assistance, and use data and analytics to refine academic advising. Those efforts are important, but any plan that views improving retention and graduation rates as primarily the role of the central administration will invariably come up short. The only way colleges will see real and lasting progress is by making a campuswide commitment to student success.

That has been our experience at Georgia State University, where in recent years we have coupled centralized efforts with those at the college and department level. The results have been notable. Over the past 18 years we have raised graduation rates by more than 20 points, and for six years in a row African American, Hispanic, and Pell-eligible students have, on average, all graduated from the university at or above the rate of the student body over all.

During that time we have learned that one position is critical to our success: the department chair. Sitting at the nexus of the student body, the faculty, and the

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administration, department chairs are perfectly placed to provide crucial leadership in the effort to help students progress toward graduation.

Despite their important positioning, department chairs are often unprepared to play a role in student success. It can be difficult for them to figure out how they can influence institutionwide retention, progression, and graduation rates. The truth is that chairs can take several actions to help create an environment that leads to better student outcomes. Here are some key ones:

Make student success a priority for the department. Chairs set the tone within an academic unit and can raise questions that are broader than what an instructor might ask and more precise than what administrators might ask.

For example: Are there curricular barriers to success? How long does it take majors to complete their degree? Is the department fulfilling student demand, or is progress being delayed because courses aren't available? Are prerequisite courses leading to success in subsequent courses? Are courses scheduled in a way that supports progression? Is the number of majors growing? Is there a lot of variance in grades across sections, modalities, or instructors? Are there equity gaps in the academic performance of students taking courses in the department?

Each of those issues affects retention, progression, and graduation, and when handled poorly, frustrates both a student's academic experience and a college's student-success goals.

Use data to improve outcomes. Monitoring basic metrics can help department chairs figure out how to improve the academic progression of their students. For example, lowering the percentage of students in introductory or core-curriculum courses who receive a D or an F or who withdraw (the DFW rate) can help reduce first-year attrition rates.

The mathematics department at Georgia State, with an enrollment of more than 8,000 students each year, used to have a DFW rate of 43 percent in precalculus, college algebra, and introductory statistics. Such low success rates translated to thousands of students in academic and financial trouble, some because of lost scholarships and others because they were no longer academically eligible for financial aid.

In response, the math department changed how it taught introductory classes, from a traditional lecture format to an emporium-based model in which students attend one lecture each week and spend two other hours working on adaptive-learning exercises in a lab where they can get assistance when they need it. The result was a 35-percent decrease in the DFW rate and more than 1,200 additional students passing introductory math each year.

Understand reasons behind enrollment and completion trends. No growth in the major, low graduation rates, and a long time to degree all suggest the need for curricular improvements. At Georgia State, for example, business majors needed an overall GPA of 2.5 each term to take upper-division courses in business. We learned that many students were taking unnecessary non-business courses to raise their GPA, only to enroll in business courses the next semester and watch their GPA fall below the threshold necessary to take courses in the major again. That pattern created a progression challenge because the overall GPA was largely unrelated to success in the major.

Once the problem was understood, the faculty used data to revise prerequisites to include a higher GPA requirement for admission to the major but only in courses that predicted degree completion, such as introductory accounting, micro- and macroeconomics, and computer-information systems. The result was a decrease in time to degree.

Ensure greater equity for students. Department chairs have the ability to disaggregate data based on race, income, gender, and ethnicity, and can use that information to deal with inequalities. Department chairs at Georgia State worked with their faculty members to expand supplemental instruction in introductory courses because low-income and underrepresented students were often reluctant to seek help during faculty office hours. In addition, department chairs have supported the use of early-alert systems to identify students who are struggling, and they have worked with academic advisers to ensure that all students, not just the well-connected ones, receive timely information about the major.

The results are significant. Since 2011 the number of STEM degrees awarded to Black students has increased by 167 percent, to Black male students by 221 percent, and to Hispanic students by 338 percent. Identifying problems early makes a big difference, especially in the toughest majors.

Colleges have a responsibility, especially with the ever-increasing financial burden placed on students and their families, to do everything they can to ensure that students thrive. That means fewer people at an institution can afford to sit on the sidelines — especially those who have the potential to effect serious change. Department chairs might not have thought of themselves as the key players in ensuring student success, but it is crucial for the success of both their institutions and their students that they begin to do so now.

Allison Calhoun-Brown is senior vice president for student success and chief enrollment officer at Georgia State University.

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ANDRIY ONUFRIYENKO, GETTY IMAGES

8 Practical, Sustainable Steps to a Diverse Faculty

The best practices for increasing the racial and ethnic diversity of your faculty are neither mysterious nor terrifically expensive.

By GRACIE LAWSON-BORDERS and DAVID D. PERLMUTTER

WHEN IT COMES TO the hiring and retention of faculty of color, the situation across higher education is, as the saying goes, "déjà vu all over again." Colleges and universities seem trapped in a time loop, issuing proclamations and statements similar to those made by our predecessors decades ago with limited success. Campus activists are wondering: Can academe live up to its promises this time?

Both of us are deans of communications schools at research universities and presidents of national academic societies in our field. Our institutions are decidedly different: One is a private, historically black university in the racially and ethnically diverse, densely populated city of Washington, and the other is a public university in ethnically diverse yet lightly populated, largely rural West Texas. Yet we have converged on a similar set of prescriptions for recruiting, hiring, and retention of faculty of color in academe.

Our suggestions are based on the following shared principles:

- The best practices for increasing faculty diversity are neither mysterious nor terrifically expensive. Just consider all of the money spent by elite and wealthy institutions on diversity programs that haven't produced much improvement in hiring over the years.
- It is common to say that we have to "listen to the voices demanding change." But some of the solutions being proposed challenge the traditional systems we have in place for faculty hiring, promotion, and tenure. It's time we stopped ignoring those contradictions and settled them head on with reason and goodwill. Listening is good. Actions and timetables are best.
- Plans for increasing faculty diversity must be feasible and practical as well as idealistic and ethical. As administrators, we are charged with making things work, for the long term. If a problem occurs repeatedly, both the system and the culture that has accepted it need alteration. Otherwise change is unsustainable.
- Finally, and conversely, all administrators soon learn that every decision is a trade-off — often with each competing constituency viewing its cherished goals as vital, and even inviolate. The pie is not infinitely large; to gain one thing often means adjusting another. To create an equitable environment, the dynamics of the power structure must shift.

With those premises in mind, we offer the following guidelines on how to successfully increase diversity and inclusion in faculty-hiring practices. There are many others, but these are the ones that we think stand out as needing immediate attention.

Identify prospects and build your inclusive brand ahead of time. Loving, enduring marriages don't start with the ceremony.

One of the most common mistakes is treating diversity in hiring as an afterthought — rather than as a long-term relationship, complete with courtship and mutual commitment. Departments often assert, "We need more faculty of color," and then embark on a search. But if it were that easy, those faculty members would be on board already. The search has to begin *before* the position is open, guided by these questions:

- What is your department doing to build its brand as a place welcoming to people who don't look like the current faculty, or research the same topics?
- How are you trying to secure a reputation now in ways that will smooth the path for recruiting in the years to come?
- Who are you as an institution? What are your culture and goals? How are they perceived externally?
- How does your locale read to outsiders?

More directly, build human bridges. Are you inviting faculty of color to be guest lecturers and speakers (virtually or in person) at your institution? Professors and administrators should not only network at academic conferences but also reach out to faculty of color who are presenters and participants. The coffee klatch, panel, poster walk-by, and sit-down are more than introductions; they are openings to stay connected and to check in on someone's progress or status. Often, people do not know if they are ready for a change until someone asks.

The aim of these efforts: Your department, when it does announce a job opening, will have a positive image in the eyes of faculty of color in your field. Moreover, you will have friends already in place and be able to call upon external allies. The latter may recommend your department to colleagues within their own network, including new Ph.D.s.

Know what's appealing about you. Whether you are talking with faculty of color before or during a search, you need to paint a picture of what makes you attractive as an institution, program, and place.

To take a personal example, one of us is an African American woman who is a former journalist turned academic. Earlier in her career, she was recruited by the University of Wyoming for a job opening as a program director and a faculty member. Wyoming is not known for having a diverse population. But the university's faculty members and administrators reached out to her and effectively made the case: "You would be welcome here, and you would enjoy working with us."

Assume nothing about where candidates of color prefer to work and live. Some faculty of color prefer to work in a city, others like college towns; some want to work at a large university, some prefer a small liberal-arts college. Whether a candidate is from Oklahoma or New York, Maine or Alabama, you won't know who is willing to join your faculty until you give them a reason to do so.

So ask, show, and tell. Create an awareness and comfort with your institution and your local region. Diversity is a state of mind, not Noah's Ark counting two by two.

Encourage hiring committees to recruit — not just "open and advertise." In most fields, departments have gotten used to passive recruiting: There are usually far too many candidates for too few openings. All you need to do to attract great candidates is take out an ad. Recruiting means contacting your friends, and extra effort means sending an email to some people you already know.

But recruiting candidates of color requires active, friendly, strategic recruiting. More academics and programs are starting to appreciate that anyone worth hiring is worth wooing. Unfortunately, we still need to work on the execution. It's not enough to email a candidate ("We have a job open. You might think about it.") or make a quick phone call to a friend at another university ("Let me know if any names come to mind.").

Real recruiting entails cold-calling, repeated attempts, studied persuasion, and in-depth conversations. Potential recruits may not know you, have heard of your program, or even be "on the market," but you might change their minds with enough time and effort. Don't hold a cattle call; build a relationship of trust.

Widen your assumptions about the meaning of "qualified." Faced with criticism for their poor hiring record, academics and leaders often insist: "Well, we tried, but there are just not enough qualified candidates who are persons of color." A modern retort might be: Perhaps you are defining positional qualifications too narrowly.

In our field of media and communications, programs have stretched their wings in many instances by hiring clinical professors or professors of practice. These former industry practitioners bring a wealth of real-world knowledge and application to our programs. They also do not necessarily need doctorates to teach their skills, mentor individual students, advise student groups, and even run labs and centers.

Other disciplines should explore ways to be similarly expansive. After all, not everybody in chemistry has to be a grant-winning researcher. Full-time teaching positions can be starter places for diversifying your faculty. Even departments at research universities don't need every faculty position to be 100-percent focused on research. It's not an either/or situation. In STEM departments, faculty members whose focus is on teaching, student engagement, and service can bring in grant money, too. Across disciplines, an increasing pool of state and private funding is available for projects related to public service, diversity enhancement, and community engagement.

Enlist allies to promote your search. Candidates from underrepresented groups will want to assess the viability of living in your town and whether they will find valuable relationships outside the department. Faculty of color from other departments can help by serving on the search committee (just don't ask them too often) or simply by chatting with candidates about what it's like to live in northeast Ohio or the Pacific Northwest. Real-estate agents talk about staging a home to appeal to buyers. That approach applies here: You are showing off your campus and locale as a place candidates and their families can call home — personally and professionally.

Likewise, seek assistance off campus. No matter where you are located, there will be organizations serving communities of color, with leaders eager to help. They will be knowledgeable about houses of worship, food options, social life, family life, dating, and "giving back" causes. You have more local allies than you think, but first you have to approach them, build mutual trust, and ask for help in a common cause.

Rethink the role of students in searches. Here's where clashes between academic culture and activists' demands will hit hardest and fastest in the years to come. In reviewing the specific requests made by Black Lives Matter groups on campuses, we found one statement that was widely repeated yet, revealingly, often not discussed in academic discourse about diversity. That is: Students feel completely disengaged from the hiring and promotion-and-tenure processes.

If we, as academics, assert that "student voices must be heard" on this front, then it's time for an open conversation that includes students. To wit: Can we find ways to involve them more deeply in hiring than just putting a graduate student on the search committee as a nonvoting member (the typical "solution")? What about expanding their role in tenure decisions, or even annual evaluations (beyond the indirect avenue of student course evaluations)?

We don't take a position on these matters here because we don't have a simple, universal answer for all institutions and situations. Fair-labor practices, union or faculty-senate rules, operating procedures, and legal issues abound. But a dialogue needs to start on each campus, and your students should not — and no doubt, cannot — be disregarded.

Redefine the notion of "fit." The oldest and deepest tradition in academic hiring is the inclination to hire people who we think "fit" our culture, mission, and even locale. This is not necessarily a faulty or malicious tendency. Faculty at an R1 university will understandably balk if a job candidate for a tenure-track position that is expected to bring in a lot of research grants sounds reluctant to articulate a research program. Likewise, a department chair at a small, rural liberal-arts college will raise an eyebrow if, at dinner, a candidate says, "I'm sort of a big-city person. It looks like there's nothing to do around here after work?"

In such moments, questions and doubts mount: Can this candidate earn tenure here? Will this hire be able to connect with our students? Is this a colleague in for the long haul? Or someone who will leave in a few years for a "better" fit at another institution?

So "fit" applies — within reason. But it can also be a pernicious and prejudicial variable, lazily applied. It can be used to exclude people "who are not like us" and to discount a candidate of color who "might not relate" to the student body, town, or culture of the institution.

In 2020, those apprehensions can be turned into positives. Our job is not to train students to work only with, and for, people exactly like them. Faculty members who don't really fit the home-grown community can offer all students the skills they will need in our socially and culturally complex world. New lines of research, new ways of teaching, and new perspectives on issues may be exactly what your department should be looking for in a new hire — for your students, your mission, and your future.

Lay out the path to long-term success and not just the start-up package. The news media have reported story after story of faculty of color being denied tenure at elite institutions — the same places that loudly proclaim how much money, time, and effort they have invested in diversifying their faculty. We are not privy to the details of these cases, but there are enough headline-grabbing instances of reversal of fortune to indicate that something is askew — perhaps the system itself.

Take, for example, the recent news that Paul C. Harris will earn tenure in the counselor-education program at the University of Virginia, after an initial denial in January. In July, his dean reversed that decision, going against a faculty vote and signaling another clash in the governance-culture tradition.

> **New lines of research, new ways of teaching, and new perspectives on issues may be exactly what your department should be looking for in a new hire.**

It's no wonder, then, that a major question for candidates of color is, "Will I be supported after I'm hired?" Unfortunately, we tend to highlight the benefits of the start-up package but are habitually vague when candidates ask questions about their future prospects, such as:

- What is your mentoring system?
- What do you offer for faculty development?
- What is your record of retention and promotion of faculty members from underrepresented groups?
- What protections do you have in place to prevent faculty of color, and women, from being overburdened by service commitments?
- What is the attitude of the tenured faculty toward the new hire's area of research and teaching?

The suspicion of faculty of color that you seek to hire them "just to check a box" will be fed if you don't have good answers, detailed plans, and concrete examples.

The next few years will tell whether we are really at a tipping point in the diversification of the faculty at America's institutions of higher learning.

Certainly, the changes demanded by student activists will require institutions to make some marked adjustments to the ways academics are used to operating. For example, in June, the Black Student Union at the University of California at San Diego said it sought "an increase in the percentage of Black faculty to 10 percent of the overall tenured/tenure-track faculty by 2025. Again, 10 percent is in accordance with both the statewide and national Black population. This target must include all departments, particularly STEM programs."

The truth is: Our hiring systems — left unchanged — are unlikely to achieve such a goal. So we need to work together to identify and carry out practical, achievable, sustainable solutions that work in day-to-day reality and don't just sound good as a tweet. Maintaining the status quo, in our view, will entail greater danger to the stability of colleges and universities at a time when we can ill afford more division and discord.

Gracie Lawson-Borders is dean of Howard University's Cathy Hughes School of Communications and a former president of the Association of Schools of Journalism and Mass Communications.

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Ask the Chair: 'How Can I Help Adjunct Instructors?'

By KEVIN DETTMAR

This column appeared as the first in a series offering advice on the challenges of running a department.

IT'S SOMETIMES SAID — OK, *I've* sometimes said — that chairs at most institutions shoulder a lot of responsibility without a lot of power. We sit uneasily in the middle tier of the org chart, a place that can often feel pretty lonely. And we usually are there without much (or any) guidance: It's a role that little in our preprofessional training has prepared us for, and for which the institution provides scant resources.

As a longstanding personnel practice, this is really quite puzzling.

Imagine, for instance, a young violin prodigy who — after years of lessons and thousands upon thousands of hours of lonely practice, unsuccessful auditions, and poorly paid temporary gigs — finally lands a chair in the New York Philharmonic. If you're a faculty member in a permanent position at a college or university, that's you. You've grabbed the brass ring. Now imagine that — after a few years of playing well, moving up from third chair to second to concertmaster and releasing some well-regarded recordings — our violinist is made the orchestra's … managing director. Overseeing the orchestra's daily operations, spearheading its strategic planning, and supervising the different departments responsible for fund raising, event production, and all the rest. That's a department chair. It's a strange way to run a railroad, but it's how we do it.

The mystery and confusion surrounding this vital position in academe are why I wrote my new book, *How to Chair a Department*, published by the the Johns Hopkins University Press. While writing it, I stored the files for various chapters in a folder called "Chairsplaining." The book attempts to survey the wide landscape of a department chair's or a program director's job, and to provide broad principles to support a strategic approach to the role.

Sometimes, however, those principles can seem difficult to apply to the prickly, particular situations that arise in our own departments, among colleagues and even friends. So I'm pleased now to launch this monthly advice column, "Ask the Chair." I'm here to try to fill in some of that training you never got and to provide a Guide for the Perplexed.

Question: I'm not happy about my department's reliance on adjunct instructors, but my university couldn't function without them. What leverage do I have as a department chair to make the conditions of their employment more professional and more ethical — even, dare I wish it, more humane?
— Raging Against (While Operating) the Machine

Dear RATM,

One of the most difficult aspects of moving into academic administration is that you give up — at least to some degree — the ability to criticize the institution from the outside. As chair, like any middle manager, you'll sometimes be expected to act in accordance with policies you disagree with.

Faculty members (especially tenured ones) can lob criticisms at the institution and its administration with near impunity. But chairs — while never surrendering the right to critique, which is an essential element of academic freedom — sometimes have to hold their noses and carry out a mandate or decision that they find misguided, or even distasteful.

> **Perhaps the area in which department heads most often fail our contingent colleagues is in supporting their scholarly aspirations.**

I love the way you've framed your question, RATM, which shows that you understand some of the limitations of the chair's role. You could band together with other department chairs and program directors and push collectively for a response from the administration. But as a lone department chair, you're unlikely to have much leverage.

Accepting the position means agreeing to carry out institutional rules and mandates. That said, there are small but significant things a department chair can (and should) do to make an unfair situation a bit more humane for contingent colleagues. I'll start by stating the givens over which you will have little or no control: The senior administration will set salaries for contingent faculty members, decide on benefits (if any), and define their teaching load.

That's a lot that's already set in stone. So what can you do as chair?

First, while you don't control the contractual course load for part-time and non-tenure-track faculty members, you probably do have some ability to create a genial course schedule for them. For example, try to double-up their classes: Two sections of the same course mean less prep time than assigning someone to teach two entirely different courses. Likewise, be thoughtful about their weekly teaching schedules. Asking an adjunct to teach four or five days a week, rather than consolidating that instructor's courses on two or three days, adds unnecessary commuting time to an already full teaching schedule and makes a challenging situation that much worse.

Perhaps the area in which department heads most often fail our contingent colleagues is in supporting their scholarly aspirations. Some instructors in your department may prefer an adjunct position because they appreciate the flexibility of part-time teaching and/or have little or no research expectations.

But many or most of your adjuncts would be happier, in a perfect world, with a full-time, permanent appointment. Part of what you can do to support these folks is to provide them with opportunities to continue burnishing their scholarly credentials. That may mean using departmental funds to support their participation in conferences and inviting them to present their work at faculty colloquia. You could also ask contingent scholars to be part of a visiting-speakers series — but if you do, pay them what you would pay a visiting faculty member to participate.

In the departments I have led, most of my contingent instructors have been on the job market for permanent positions. I've always tried to break the ice by acknowledging that fact explicitly, and offering to write them a letter in support of their next job (without suggesting that I'm trying to get rid of them!). I also ask them to invite me to observe them teach, so that I can include convincing details in the recommendation letter I write. And in order to speak to their scholarly qualifications — though ideally they have other letter writers who can do a better job on that front — I familiarize myself with their research, in print or in draft.

In the end, supporting contingent faculty members looks a lot like supporting tenure-track and tenured professors: You're simply trying to provide the conditions under which they can realize their professional aspirations.

Kevin Dettmar is a professor of English and director of the Humanities Studio at Pomona College. His latest book, published in September 2022, is How to Chair a Department.

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I Went to a Boot Camp for Department Chairs. Was It Worth It?

A professor in her first year as department head shares what she learned in a leadership-training workshop.

By MANYA WHITAKER

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I became chair of my department in January 2020 when my predecessor stepped down after 10 years (!) in the position. My department is small, so I've known since I was hired that I would eventually be chair, but I never considered how to prepare for the role — I was more focused on getting tenure. I certainly could not have guessed that my first year of chairing would be during a global pandemic that coincided with the departure of our president and provost.

My department is the only one at my liberal-arts college with graduate programs, so I am in the unique position of having additional duties that other department chairs on our campus don't. So in addition to overseeing our department's undergraduate programs, I function as a graduate-school dean, graduate-admissions director, and financial-aid director. In the fall of 2019, just before I took the departmental reins, I got my act together and decided I needed some training if I was going to succeed in my new position(s).

Like most faculty members, I receive email solicitations promoting all kinds of professional-development workshops. To be honest, they always felt like a hoax to me. For $4,000, I would get the pleasure of sitting in a room full of strangers, while someone with no familiarity with my institution told me how to lead my department. I wasn't interested.

At one point, I looked into hiring an executive coach, but that was even more expensive, and I was pretty sure my college would not foot the bill.

So I went back to square one, looked more deeply into the workshop options for new department chairs, and found a few that piqued my interest. I emailed my dean to ask if the college could help support the cost of the training, and, happily, she agreed (turns out, we have institutional memberships with many of the sponsor organizations, so that helped lower the cost). I signed up for two leadership workshops for the spring and summer of 2020 — both of which were canceled because of Covid.

I stumbled through my first year of (virtual) chairing, hoping the workshops would be rescheduled. Eventually they were, and one fit my schedule perfectly. I recently completed a four-week, virtual boot camp for department chairs that, to my surprise, proved highly useful.

So here I am, eating crow, and sharing with you what I learned from my boot-camp experience. In what follows, I'm not advertising a particular group; just telling you what I learned and why I think you should ditch your reservations.

Format. At first, I confess, I was leery of the boot camp's virtual format. After 16 months of Zoom teaching, I know how difficult it can be to make online learning engaging. The boot camp was scheduled for four consecutive Wednesdays, alternating between six- and three-hour sessions. The idea of sitting in front of my computer for six hours did not appeal to me, but hey, at least I didn't have the hassle of traveling somewhere for this experience.

After the first six-hour day, I was surprised that it hadn't felt that long. The workshop was limited to 25 participants; its two instructors took turns presenting on the strengths and pitfalls of various leadership styles. There were small-group breakout sessions in which participants could talk about complex topics (e.g., How do you maintain authority when most department members outrank you?) and share strategies that worked in our respective departments.

I generally dislike role-playing games but even those workshop exercises — on handling sensitive conversations and managing difficult faculty members — were excellent opportunities to practice new skills.

Over all, I found the workshop to be incredibly interactive. Participants were able, much more than I expected, to get to know each other and build personal and professional connections. We enjoyed one another's company so much that we've asked the organization to hold bimonthly Zoom check-ins for us, and a reunion next spring.

Content. I chose this workshop because its range of topics appealed to me. The organizers designed a curriculum that moved from leadership theory to practice, and focused on conflict management, self-care, and career development. Each session included self-reflective exercises on our leadership values and goals, and concrete strategies for a variety of practices — building a relationship with the dean, working with human resources, initiating termination proceedings.

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My favorite activities were the self-assessments and the leadership "audit" that solicited anonymous feedback from our department colleagues. The audit was particularly well done. All I had to do was send department members a link to a three-question, open-ended survey about my leadership strengths and limitations. The host organization collected the responses and aggregated them into a single report that was shared with me two days before the second session.

I then had a one-on-one meeting with a workshop leader to review the results. This 45-minute conversation was extremely valuable as it (a) allowed me to get to know one of the facilitators, and made me feel as though he was genuinely invested in my professional development, and (b) provided an opportunity to process the departmental feedback that, I admit, made me uneasy (see below).

Before our conversation, I was not looking forward to discussing my faults with a stranger, but having an outsider's perspective was actually very useful. He helped me contextualize my colleagues' comments in the audit, and strategize about how to leverage my strengths and fill the gaps in my leadership style. I've opted to do three additional coaching sessions, post-boot camp, (for additional fees, of course) and I'm glad I did. Those sessions will offer more individualized support for my leadership development.

What I learned about my leadership style. My biggest takeaway from this experience is that I am an effective leader — but not always the leader my team needs me to be. Let me unpack that:

- Who I am personally is indistinguishable from who I am professionally. We did an exercise where we identified the things that matter most to us in our role as chair. Mine were competence/willingness to learn, reliability, and integrity. The facilitators made a big deal of reiterating that these were professional values, not personal ones. They said most people value different things in work versus home settings, and that it was OK if the three values that mattered most to you on the job were not the same as what mattered to you in your personal life. But for me, my professional and personal values are the same. I am not sure if that's good or bad, but it is my reality.
- My leadership assessment revealed that I am a critical thinker in times of calm, but a warrior in times of stress. Both of those profiles are task-oriented and data-driven — with very little focus on interpersonal

relationships. Basically, I just want to get things done properly and efficiently, no matter who does the work. However, a second assessment — of my conflict-management style — showed that, in making decisions, I prioritize dialogue, collaboration, and compromise. Those two sets of results contradict one another on the surface. But after much reflection, I've realized that what I feel and think is not always what I externalize. In other words, I may feel impatient to get things done, but I make certain that in moving forward, everyone's voice is heard and that we all feel satisfied with our direction. Or, maybe I don't. …

- My leadership audit affirmed that I am a "natural chief operating officer" and that my strongest attributes are my dedication to the department, work ethic, time management, and organizational skills. But among my weak points are a tendency to "leave colleagues behind," so much so that my attempts to collaborate "can feel performative" and that I don't "make time for personal connections." Ouch.

So here I am with a lot of data points (which I love), some of which conflict with one another (which I dislike).

But the boot camp is not meant to answer questions. It's designed to expose your leadership style for further self-reflection. Toward that end, I am meeting with a trusted department colleague and friend to parse through all of this information, with the hopes of getting concrete examples of my leadership practices that do and don't work.

I've already taken steps to better communicate my genuine appreciation of my colleagues — something that clearly gets buried beneath my desire to get things done. I sent thank-you emails to everyone who completed the leadership audit, summarizing their collective feedback and reiterating my commitment to improve in my role as chair. I mailed hand-written cards noting each person's unique contributions to the department and to my professional and personal growth. I sent our newest colleague a welcome gift with a personalized note indicating my excitement to have her join us.

Once the fall semester gets under way, I hope to continue to make space for genuine personal connections during monthly one-on-ones with colleagues and especially during department meetings. I am going to work with my coach on managing my "precrastination" — a tendency to "complete tasks quickly just for the sake of getting things done sooner rather than later" — borne of my fear of getting behind in my work. To some, precrastination might not sound like a problem, but it can become one if you offend someone by answering emails too quickly or ending a meeting too abruptly just to have those tasks done.

I also want help figuring out how to balance my team's desire for process-oriented collaborative work (people working on tasks together) with my preference for outcome-oriented, distributed work (people working on tasks individually). While the idea of having even more to do this coming year triggers my warrior mind-set, I am grateful for this experience because I know it's the kind of work that will advance my career.

If you are on the fence about whether or not to pursue formal leadership training, I vote yes. It was worth the money and the time to invest in my professional growth.

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JUSTIN RENTERIA FOR THE CHRONICLE

We Need to Talk About Retirement

Academics value age and experience. We call it "wisdom." But an important component of that is knowing when to call it quits.

By KEVIN DETTMAR

As a profession, we need to have a conversation about faculty retirement — in no small part because conversations about retirement in academe are so difficult (and, in some cases, even illegal) to have.

Our hiring procedures for screening candidates at the start of an academic career have been widely discussed. (And even parodied: See Julie Schumacher's 2014 novel, *Dear Committee Members*.) What we talk about far less, though, is the much murkier process at the other end of the career arc — the decision about when and how to step away from the profession.

Let me open in the spirit of full disclosure: I'm a late-career academic. (How odd it feels to write those words, given that I still suffer from occasional grad-school nightmares.) I started full-time college teaching in 1990; I'm now 63. So I'm shy of the traditional retirement age of 65, but not by much. And although I'm writing this because I've been thinking about senior colleagues, I've come to realize that this piece is about me, too. I've been teaching for more than three decades now at five different institutions, and I've seen a lot of professors wrestling with (and sometimes avoiding entirely) the decision of when to retire.

First, a little history: Back in 1968, when the American Association of University Professors published the first edition of "The Redbook" (its policies and reports on topics like tenure, academic freedom, and governance), American colleges and universities required faculty members to retire at age 65. In 1982 higher education bumped up its mandatory-retirement age to 70 and, four years later, received an exemption when Congress banned mandatory-retirement policies for most employers. Since 1994, when the federal exemption expired, institutions have been prohibited from forcing professors to retire at any age.

Legislating retirement at age 65 or even 70 is the very definition of arbitrary, and surely Congress was correct to make it illegal. (Since I'll turn 70 before the end of this decade, that is perhaps especially clear to me!) But it's equally clear, from my experience as both a faculty member and a department chair, that doing away with mandatory retirement has left faculty members with little guidance on the matter.

Yes, an age-based rule of 65, or 70 — or 85, for that matter — is a blunt instrument that doesn't take into account the different rates and ways in which we age, our different life situations, the different needs of our academic units, or the differing career trajectories in different disciplines. One-size-fits-all retirement mandates are admirably clear but frustratingly unnuanced. But in their absence, how can we help colleagues, and ourselves, reach thoughtful and well-informed decisions about retirement?

Let's begin by considering the benefits — to both the faculty member and the institution — of timely retirement. Who is harmed when faculty members continue in their role longer than they're truly effective?

- **Our students.** There comes a point in every career — unless we're self-aware enough to retire before we reach it — when our experience, expertise, and wisdom are overshadowed by our distance from our students and their lives, and in some cases by our declining abilities. Early in my career I taught with a senior colleague whose pedagogy had clearly become compromised. His courses consisted primarily of playing audiotapes of literary texts to fill the class hour; students reported that he would sometimes nod off by the end of the period. I never saw his course evaluations, but the whole matter became public when, during a department discussion of mandating writing assignments, this colleague (whose only graded work for the course was multiple-choice exams) protested, "But my eyes aren't good enough to grade essays!" Having said the quiet part out loud, he opted to retire later that term.

- **Our junior colleagues.** In my field at least (and English is hardly alone), the pool of bright, ambitious, well-trained junior scholars far exceeds available faculty positions. Of course it's no one faculty member's responsibility to correct for the nationwide erosion of tenure-track and other permanent faculty positions by retiring to make room for the next generation. But there are younger scholars, teachers, and creators who may deserve the spot that we're holding onto. A senior professor who continues to occupy a line after his or her teaching and research have fallen off precipitously is, in a very real sense, nipping a promising young career in the bud.

- **Our senior scholars.** Finally — and for me, most painfully — our unregulated approach to retirement harms senior faculty members themselves. Many years ago I worked with a talented professor who, by the time I got to know him, had become consumed by a vicious cycle of diminishing returns. This professor had ceased to be an active scholar; at the same time, student demand for his courses and mentorship was on the wane. Those and other factors resulted in small or no annual raises, which left him grumpy and resentful, which (I thought) further alienated potential students. Falling off from the pinnacle of a very successful career, he found each year a bit more bleak than the last. As a friend, I wanted desperately to help him find a way to break the cycle and retire with dignity. I never did.

I want my faculty colleagues — and myself — to go out on a high note. In the house where I grew up, we idolized the Dodgers ace Sandy Koufax because, as my mother often told me, "he went out on top." (There was also a rumor, which at this distance in time cannot be confirmed, that my mother had once gone out with him.)

But "going out on top" is really only half the story. The arthritis in his pitching elbow had become so severe that Koufax felt he had no choice, retiring at the age of 30. But those last six years of his career, during which he won the Cy Young Award a then-unprecedented three times, have never been equaled. Yes, Koufax retired because of a career-ending medical condition, but he went out at the top of his game.

The announcement of your retirement should take your colleagues by surprise, until its aptness slowly dawns on them. I've known faculty members who went the surprise route, and it sparked a joyful celebration of their careers. They left while they were still valued by students, and before their record was tainted by secret faculty speculation about when they would step down.

Ours is a profession (unlike Major League Baseball) that values age, experience, and maturity. We call it "wisdom." But an important component of this type of wisdom is knowing when to call it quits. Senior professors often continue to enjoy — and believe ourselves still good at — the work. A colleague more than a decade older than I am is fond of saying, "Why would I retire now? I'm at the top of my game!" I only wish I were confident that her students had the same assessment.

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When to say when. There are, then, many good reasons to retire at the "right" time — whenever that might be for each of us. What prevents us? In part, our indecision is deeply human. Retirement planning can be hard because most of us don't want to face our mortality, and the waning of our gifts. But plenty of other factors also may make it difficult for a faculty member to make the call at the right moment.

One of the biggest has been the gradual shift over the past few decades from defined benefit ("pension") to defined contribution (401[k] and 403[b]) retirement plans at colleges and universities. When I signed my first tenure-track contract, in 1991, I had the option of participating either in the state-sponsored pension plan or the "portable" retirement option (in this case, TIAA-CREF). Because I didn't picture myself retiring from that first institution, I went with TIAA-CREF.

Having bounced around a few campuses in the years since, I surely made the right choice for me. But a defined-contribution plan carries an inherent risk not found in pension plans: A major economic downturn — like the stock-market crash of 2008 — can force faculty members to postpone retirement as they watch the value of their nest egg ebb. I certainly know faculty members whose retirement dates were pushed back after the 2008 downturn. The Dow is down 15 percent for the year as I write this, so we shouldn't be surprised that some faculty retirements previously planned for 2022-23 will be put on ice as a result.

Some equally important factors, however, are less easy to quantify. For many of us, teaching and research aren't simply what we do but who we are. They are a primary source of our identity, and it's not clear who we'd be without them. Especially for those who have invested decades of time and personal energy into faculty work, external sources of meaning and community may be scarce. Some faculty members even believe that teaching "keeps them young" — though I would argue that students are being poorly served if they're used to prop up someone's professional identity.

For some faculty members the prospect of retiring is fraught because institutional conditions suggest it's unlikely that they'll be replaced. Rather than opening up room for a bright young colleague, their retirement may simply shrink the department by a tenure-track line.

Finally, personal factors, of which colleagues may be entirely unaware, come to bear on these decisions. It's easy to forget in an institutional context that retirement is often a couple or family decision.

How can institutions help? On the financial front, retirement incentives can ease the financial burden on faculty members who would like to retire but can't afford to. I recently spoke with an academic I hadn't seen in a while, who, I was surprised to learn, would be retiring soon. The professor's university had recently announced an incentive that would pay two full years' salary to faculty members who retired before turning 68. My friend and the other faculty members who took the offer would be paid as though they were teaching two more years, but they would be free to start laying the foundations for the next chapter of their lives.

Such an incentive represents a significant upfront financial commitment by the institution, of course. If we assume, for argument's sake, that a senior full professor is making twice as much as a new assistant professor, it would take the institution about four years to recover the cost (less if the retiring professor isn't replaced immediately, as is often the case). But eventually the investment is recouped, and new energy and expertise are brought to the institution. It's one way the college can encourage the creation of new positions for young scholars, something faculty members can't be expected to fix on their own.

Another means that institutions have to soften the financial blow is to offer a phased-retirement plan. Details vary, but these programs typically allow a faculty member to move from full- to part-time work for a limited term (often three to five years) before full retirement. Such a plan costs the institution nothing extra (since it means cutting someone's salary in half for half-time work), and allows the faculty member to decelerate in steps, rather than shift to unemployment overnight. And while I'm somewhat uncomfortable with performance labels, research has shown that phased retirement is most attractive to the least "productive" members of the faculty. That's a secondary benefit of this type of plan for an institution.

Finally, colleges and universities can invest in the benefits provided to emeritus professors. Many academics fear retirement because they'll lose their scholarly community. Robust emeritus-faculty programming — including office space, if possible — may make the transition a bit easier to contemplate. Many of us are ready to give up the classroom or the laboratory before we're ready to give up collegial interactions and conversations.

What can department chairs do? First, let's be clear about what you can't do. You can't initiate discussions with professors about the timing of their retirement. You can't schedule a meeting with Bob and say, "Bob, I'm sensing that the thrill is gone: Certainly your student evaluations suggest as much. Isn't it time for you to retire?" In your supervisory role, you are prohibited from broaching the topic. To do so would open you (and your college) to a claim of age discrimination. If you have specific questions about this, consult your institution's HR or legal offices.

But while you can't start the conversation, you can be available for one. And you can be prepared in the event that it arises. Retirements typically create salary savings for the institution. If you sense that a professor in your department may be thinking about retiring, an off-the-record conversation with your dean about what incentives the administration is willing to provide might be in order. You'll have to keep that information in your back pocket until the day — should it arrive — that your colleague initiates the conversation.

Once again, repeat after me: You cannot open this conversation, even with a friend.

But friends and colleagues who are not chairs (or in some other supervisory relationship) can certainly have those conversations with one another. At my previous institution, chastened by the example of some senior colleagues who refused to "go gentle" into retirement, a friend and I made a pact: We each agreed to let the other know if/when the time had come to consider it. I left the institution before our agreement was ever tested; any such conversation would have been so difficult that I'm not sorry I never had to initiate it (or be its focus).

The trick, of course — and it's almost unimaginably tricky — is to suggest that it might be time for a professor to retire, not because the work now being done isn't up to snuff, but instead because the work that has been accomplished across the career amounts to a worthy legacy. This colleague has nothing left to prove, rather than nothing left to give. As faculty members, we are each somewhat different about why we entered this career, what we've done with it, and why we're still in it. There's certainly no formula for a discussion that needs to be incredibly personalized and the product of a genuinely caring relationship.

Clearly I don't have all the answers, and I'm hoping this essay will spark lots of conversations. In his poem "The Hollow Men," T.S. Eliot suggests that the world ends "not with a bang but a whimper." Don't let your career, or those of your colleagues, end in the same kind of ignominy.

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ELIZA MORSE, NETFLIX © 2021

Jay Duplass as Bill in *The Chair*

‘The Chair,’ Episode 1: ‘I’m Surprised by How Much Works’

Four academics streamed the Netflix series. They have takes.

The Netflix show *The Chair* follows a struggling English department and its new chair, Ji-Yoon Kim, played by Sandra Oh. The show has all the hallmarks of the academy, including an enrollment crisis, professors who are passionate about their areas of study, and of course conflict. We rounded up scholars to chat about the show's portrayal of academe: Alison Kinney, an assistant professor of writing at Eugene Lang College at the New School; Grace Lavery, an associate professor of English at the University of California at Berkeley; Dan Sinykin, an assistant professor of English at Emory University; and Rebecca Wanzo, a professor and chair of women, gender, and sexuality studies at Washington University in St. Louis. For a comprehensive list of recaps, click here.

This conversation has been edited for length and clarity.

Rebecca: I was surprised by how much actually works. There is enough that's realistic that it started to become stressful to watch! While we've had a few college professors as regular characters on television shows (Gary on *Thirtysomething* and Noah Wyle on *Falling Skies*, whose knowledge as a historian specializing in colonial history amusingly made him a brilliant strategist to combat an alien invasion), their primary purpose seems to be sleep with students or demoralize them. Often both. The one show I can recall that focuses on college faculty was the Richard Dreyfus star vehicle *The Education of Max Bickford* (2001-2002). My fuzzy memory makes me think it was decent but got fewer things right, and was focused on the failed liberalism of a Baby Boomer who was somewhat contemptuous of how progressivism manifested on campus. Helen Slater played a trans woman who had recently transitioned, an example of the weird blend of sympathetic and transphobic representation common to that period.

What I like about this pilot is that it does understand so many things about the moment — enrollment "crises" (which, when you see how some of the classes are doing, isn't a crisis at all), early-retirement push for senior faculty members, and a department that clearly had been given few new hires. It does make the mistake of confusing Title IX and Title VII claims. Also, Ji-Yoon's decision to make Yaz co-teach with a senior white male colleague the YEAR SHE IS UP FOR TENURE, while he is in charge of her case, is something no chair with half a brain would ever do — and certainly something no woman of color who cared even a little about a colleague would ever do. That, and the weird way that tenure seems in the hands of one person, may be illustrative of the fact that a graduate student wrote this. Co-creator Annie Wyman is very, very smart about a lot of things in this series, but the fact that she hasn't directly experienced all the intricacies of faculty life is apparent at times.

Alison: I imagine that most people watching will be academics, but I wish that the show had built in more context for viewers not in higher ed (or for any university administrators watching!), on budget crunches, enrollment, and the fallacies of bottom-line approaches. Vibrant engagement with students is essential, but I don't want to see blame for departmental-budget crises put solely on bad teaching. Lousy teaching matters and is a systemic problem, but it's an "and," not an "or," and it's being applied a bit disingenuously here. I get that the destruction of higher ed through systemic neoliberal policies doesn't necessarily make good TV … but maybe a show purporting to display the problems of chairing an English department should tackle those issues head-on?

Dan: The show wants us to know right away that it's irreverent — even slapstick. Yes, the chair's office is big and beautiful … but when the chair first sits in her chair, it collapses and she falls to the floor, followed by the title screen flashing "*The Chair.*" I'm a sucker for visual gags.

Things are falling apart. Ji-Yoon rehearses our cliché refrain ("dire crisis," "enrollments are down," "unprecedented times," "critical thinking … is more important than ever," "what we teach … cannot be quantified"), while we watch Bill drink seven beers, piss in a parking lot, fail to find his car, and steal and crash a golf cart. The show seems to love these difficult English professors — all make bids for our sympathy, even though most behave badly — while poking fun at our pretensions, maybe even worrying that our pretensions have the reins and are driving us to our demise. We purport to dispense wisdom but lack the wisdom to live well ourselves. Bill is the foremost screw-up, as the show itself reports, our stereotypical "disaffected middle-aged, white, male professor," underperforming but overvalued, leaving slack for his women-of-color colleagues to pick up. But he's also a new widower, kind to Ji-Yoon, good with Ju Ju, funny (he gives her a nameplate that says "FUCKER IN CHARGE OF YOU FUCKING FUCKS") — and, I regret to admit, hot.

Grace: The first episode's title, "Brilliant Mistake," comes from the Elvis Costello song we hear playing over the end credits, "He thought he was the king of America / where they pour Coca-Cola just like vintage wine." In this context, "he" is presumably Bill, whose brilliance consists of juxtaposing absurdism and fascism, and whose mistake is to use "Heil Hitler" as phatic speech. Whether such brilliance, or indeed such a mistake, warrants the name, let alone the kiss-off line of the entire episode, remains an open question. Nonetheless, the Costello lines that underscore Bill's lecture seem to point to some of the episode's commitments, as well as some of its blind spots. In particular, the lines narrate the difference between American and European depictions of political sovereignty on the one hand, and of cultural capital on the other. Any narrative about the humanities must explore the relationship between political power — such as that of "Board of Trustees Eisenstadt," whose relatives are, apparently, especially deserving of protection from the sexual predations of male faculty — and the refusenik uselessness of the humanities as represented by the show's one old white lady, Joan Hambling.

> What I like about this pilot is that it does understand so many things about the moment — enrollment "crises," early-retirement push for senior faculty members, and a department that clearly had been given few new hires.

Dan: I love Holland Taylor as Joan Hambling. (I consulted IMDb, and she has played an academic before, in *Saved by the Bell: The College Years*.) We're meant to be torn by her. She is, as it's said, problematic: Her rant at the Title IX coordinator for wearing short shorts is out of touch, on-the-nose sexist, high-grade cringe. Taylor, though, delivers all her lines with such joie de vivre I find her character impossible not to like.

Grace: My favorite aspect of this episode, I think, is the amity between generations: Ji-Yoon's friendship with Joan contrasts with the frosty, mistrustful relationship between Yaz and Elliot, which is a little more familiar — though perhaps also more plausible. But I'm not sure whether the price of that amity isn't a universal infantilization, with each of the characters displaced from sexuality: the faculty lounge as a pasture for *castrati*.

And I can't have been alone in thinking that the young woman to whom Bill was wishing a fond farewell at the airport (toodles, Doodles) was not his daughter but his lover, a fear intensified by her delivery of the episode's most alarming and inexplicable line, "What happened, happened." Yet the intimations of Bill's sexual incontinence are never, in fact, instantiated. We are left with the model of a modernist professional: A straight man who uses 10-buck words, and still sounds cheap.

Alison: Re: Bill's lecture, I found the actual content — apart from the Very Bad Decision — rather touching. The talk of carrying on in the absence of hope makes me wonder when this show is supposed to be set: Now? Post-pandemic? Pre-? In a world that didn't have one? This is something my students want to talk about all the time: how to continue to push forward in the face of crisis. Well, *I* want to talk about it all the time, too! Particularly now, in light of how fully the pandemic has disrupted higher ed over the last two years. I wish the character had earned that moment with a little more work, though. Instead, it feels like a foil to the student demonstrations that I'm expecting in later episodes.

Clarification: Rebecca Wanzo refers to Wyman as a graduate student, but she in fact received her Ph.D. in 2017.

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