

PART ONE

THE CHAIR'S ROLE AND  
CAREER PATH

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## I

## IN THE TRENCHES

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THE JOB OF CHAIRING a department is probably the most important, least appreciated, and toughest administrative position in higher education. Because of their intimate knowledge of their disciplines, department chairs provide advocacy for the faculty, students, and curricula of their particular fields. Although the job description for department chairs varies widely from institution to institution, most people who head academic units play at least some role in scheduling classes or establishing course rotations, have budgetary responsibilities, develop long- and short-range plans for their disciplines, serve as intermediaries between the faculty and upper administration, and are involved in hiring new faculty members. They also attend meetings—lots and lots of meetings. In return, they may receive a stipend, a reduced teaching load, a twelve-month contract, or merely the satisfaction of having made an important difference to the success of their field. Most surprising, they perform all of their duties with very little training. In a study done by Robert Cipriano and Richard Riccardi (2010), a stunning 80.7 percent of the department chairs who responded to a survey had absolutely no formal training in their administrative responsibilities. Even worse, 96.2 percent had not been exposed to best practices in departmental administration during their academic course work.

We therefore work in a highly unusual profession. In most fields, you take your course work first, earn a credential, and then apply for a job. Most department chairs establish a reputation as teachers and researchers, are given an administrative position that (unless their academic field happens to be higher education administration) usually has absolutely nothing to do with their formal credentials, and only then begin to seek training in the administrative work that is now a significant part of their

daily responsibilities. Or they sometimes begin to seek training. In a survey conducted by Jossey-Bass (2009), 91 of 137 respondents (66.4 percent) had not bought any books or subscribed to any journals or newsletters about the role of the chair. In other words, most chairs learn their job by observing what other chairs do and by trial and error. The problem with these approaches is that the exemplars we imitate are likely to vary in consistency, and there's no guarantee that the more experienced chairs around us are all engaging in best practices. Moreover, in order to learn by trial and error, you have to commit a significant number of errors. And although mistakes can be valuable learning experiences, you don't want to commit them in situations that could damage someone's livelihood, reputation, or future career. There's got to be a better way for department chairs to learn their jobs.

The issue of the training and preparation of department chairs is particularly important because there are so many chairs at colleges and universities. Institutions may have only one chief executive officer and a handful of vice presidents and deans, but the number of department chairs tends to be large even at fairly small institutions. In addition, the turnover rate is quite high. Some institutions have formal term limits for chairs, while others rotate this administrative assignment through the members of the discipline. Cipriano and Riccardi (2010) found that the average number of years most chairs spend in their positions is six. Since at least one of those years is probably devoted to a fairly steep learning curve, the vast majority of department chairs may be relatively new to their positions.

The work that department chairs do has an immediate and lasting impact. Institutions and units can survive—perhaps even thrive—for a few years under a weak president, provost, or dean, but the actions of department chair affect the day-to-day experience of students and professors alike. In a phrase that's heard repeatedly about department chairs, these are the administrators who are “down there in the trenches.” Chairs rarely, if ever, have the luxury of making a decision and then letting other people deal with the consequences. If you do something that creates a problem for someone else, you'll hear about it immediately.

The balance of this chapter explores what chairs need to do in order to take the best advantage of their unique position in the structure of the college or university.

## Use Your Resources

The next chapter explores some of the steps you should take if you're a relatively new chair or a faculty member who is likely to chair your

department in the future. For the moment, however, let's consider the basic things that all department chairs need to do, regardless of the size of their discipline, the mission of their institution, or the length of their tenure in office. And that topic brings us directly to the first essential principle in this book:

Remember to use your resources. Almost every situation you will face has already been faced by other chairs at your school or elsewhere in higher education. There are precedents all around you, and although you should never feel constrained by them, it is rarely necessary to treat every challenge or opportunity as though it were occurring for the very first time. Learn from the experience (and the mistakes) of others.

This book is a good place to begin for resources. It contains a lot of basic information, and most chapters end with a list of other recommended works. But your resources are also the policies and procedures of your institution, the ever-expanding library of books and electronic materials on nearly every aspect of higher education administration, and the professional training workshops that take place online and at conferences many times throughout the academic year.

Perhaps the question should be phrased instead as, "Who are your resources?" You can learn a great deal from other chairs at your school, your supervisor, chairs of your discipline at peer and aspirational institutions, and respected members of your own faculty. Whenever you find yourself trying to work through an issue all by yourself, trying to make a decision simply on the basis of common sense and a certain amount of guesswork, stop and remember this chapter. You're not in this alone, no matter what "this" may happen to be. The following sections identify some major resources that every department chair should be familiar with.

### *Publications*

The *Department Chair*, published quarterly by Jossey-Bass, is a thirty-two-page publication that contains ten or more articles about the practical aspects of leading an academic unit. It's an excellent way to keep up-to-date about legal issues that affect higher education administration, emerging trends and best practices in academic leadership, and the various challenges that chairs encounter routinely in their jobs. *Academic*

*Leader* appears more frequently than the *Department Chair*, but its issues and the articles it contains are shorter. Published monthly by Magna Publications, each issue of *Academic Leader* contains four to six concise articles on matters of current concern to academic administrators. *Change: The Magazine of Higher Learning* is published bimonthly by the Helen Dwight Reid Educational Foundation under the editorial leadership of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching in Stanford, California. Distributed by Heldref Publications, *Change* is probably the premiere publication today on matters of higher education policy and emerging topics of interest for colleges and universities. Many of the concepts that we now take for granted as department chairs, such as Robert Barr and John Tagg's (1995) suggestion that higher education shift from a teaching paradigm to a learning paradigm, were first explored within the pages of *Change*. Finally, the *Chronicle of Higher Education* is a weekly resource of late-breaking academic and administrative issues. Both its printed and electronic versions include numerous advertisements for positions at colleges and universities all over the world. A good rule of thumb for any decision you are about to make is, "How would this look if it appeared on the front page of the *Chronicle*?" Letters to the editor and the *Chronicle*'s online forum ([www.chronicle.com](http://www.chronicle.com)) provide an opportunity for chairs to discuss matters of policy with colleagues at other institutions worldwide.

Every department chair should be an avid reader of the publications that are most relevant to his or her specific position, but the *Department Chair*, *Academic Leader*, *Change*, and the *Chronicle of Higher Education* should be considered required reading no matter what your job description may be.

### *Web-Based Materials*

Written materials, much of them previously disseminated through publications, are also widely available through various Web sites. These materials are often free, while others can be obtained at a nominal cost.

- The American Council on Education (ACE) sponsors the Department Chair Online Resource Center ([www.acenet.edu/resources/chairs/](http://www.acenet.edu/resources/chairs/)), which includes resources on such topics as leadership, interacting with the faculty, and managing resources. Many of the items first appeared as articles in such publications as the *Department Chair*, *Academic Leader*, and the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, and materials are downloadable without cost.

- The IDEA Center, based in Manhattan, Kansas, offers a knowledge base of best practices for using its evaluation instruments, improving the quality of instruction, building on critical thinking skills, and related topics ([www.theideacenter.org/category/helpful-resources/knowledge-base](http://www.theideacenter.org/category/helpful-resources/knowledge-base)). IDEA papers and POD (Professional Organizational Development Notes) are free and organized by topic.
- Faculty Focus, a service of Magna Publications, is a free online newsletter ([www.facultyfocus.com](http://www.facultyfocus.com)), and its “Free Reports” page provides access to dozens of articles that first appeared in *Academic Leader*. “Free Reports” are organized by such topics as making the transition from faculty member to administrator, assessment, faculty development, online education, and course design. Each report includes ten or more articles related to a central theme.

### *Workshops*

A number of excellent workshops and training sessions exist that can provide chairs with information about topics of special concern to them, allow them to discuss issues of common interest, and offer them opportunities to improve their skills through exercises, case studies, and simulations. Among the many excellent conferences and workshops for department chairs are these:

- The IDEA Center’s Department Leadership Seminars, offered every November and June, provide training on a wide variety of administrative issues and are conducted by experienced professionals who bring a practical perspective to their highly interactive sessions. (See [www.theideacenter.org](http://www.theideacenter.org).)
- The Council of Independent Colleges (CIC) sponsors a number of annual workshops for department and division chairs that address such matters as effective faculty recruitment, tenure and promotion issues, conflict resolution, successful advocacy for the discipline, and the like. (See [http://www.cic.org/conferences\\_events/index.asp](http://www.cic.org/conferences_events/index.asp).) The CIC also maintains a listserv for department chairs (CICCHAIR-LIST) and publishes a wide range of books and reports that will be of interest to academic leaders, particularly at private or independent institutions.
- Kansas State University conducts the K-State Academic Chairperson’s Conference in Orlando, Florida, each February. The conference includes presentations, as well as full- and half-day

workshops on a wide variety of issues relating to chairing the academic department. Topics change each year, but often include such issues as budgeting, addressing concerns of uncollegiality, developing departmental identity, short- and long-term planning, and developing administrative portfolios. (See <http://www.dce.k-state.edu/conf/academicchairpersons/>.)

- Harvard University's Management Development Program is an intensive two-week program that assists academic leaders with developing and maintaining leadership teams, serving their institutions as change agents, analyzing financial data, motivating members of the staff and faculty, and understanding the ethical dimension of administrative decisions. Harvard also conducts Crisis Leadership in Higher Education programs that help department chairs prepare for, act effectively during, and speed recovery from significant challenges and disasters. See <http://www.gse.harvard.edu/ppe/programs/audiences/hihe/department-heads.html>.
- The Academy for Academic Leadership "is a collaborative of scholars, educational specialists, and consultants providing services that help academic leaders pursue educational excellence, the application of knowledge, the discovery of ideas, and the quest of lifelong learning" ([www.didmedia.com/aal\\_web/AAL\\_faculty.cfm](http://www.didmedia.com/aal_web/AAL_faculty.cfm)). It offers Webinars and CD-ROM training on such topics as improving online education, while providing consultancies on strategic planning, curriculum development, leadership enhancement, advancing scholarship, and change management. (See [www.academicleaders.org](http://www.academicleaders.org).)

The Webinar—or online seminar—has become a popular alternative to in-person conferences or workshops. A number of publishers offer Webinars on many aspects of departmental governance and leadership, frequently releasing a recording of the Webinar on CD-ROM for those who were not able to participate in the original program. Administrative Webinars are available from Jossey-Bass ([www.departmentchairs.org/online-training.aspx](http://www.departmentchairs.org/online-training.aspx)), Magna Publications (<http://www.magnapubs.com/calendar/index-cat-type.html>), and others, with new programs becoming available all the time.

The key considerations to make before participating in any training program, whether off-site or online:

- Are the topics that will be covered relevant to the duties that I have now or am likely to have in the near future?



- Are the presenters or facilitators experienced and well qualified in the issues we will be discussing?
- Am I likely to come away from this experience with specific ideas that I can use to make my administrative efforts more effective?

### *Leadership Training*

Sometimes department chairs underestimate their leadership role. They may assume that presidents, deans, faculty senate chairs, union officers, and senior members of the faculty are the true leaders of the institution. They themselves are just managers, organizers, or “paper pushers.” But nothing could be further from the truth. Chairs are called on to solve many different kinds of problems. They’re expected to be the leading advocates for their discipline and to strengthen their programs in any way they can. As a result, it’s important for every department chair to develop in leadership, no matter how long he or she has served the discipline. James Macgregor Burns (1978) is famous for having begun his influential book on leadership by announcing, “Leadership is one of the most observed and least understood phenomena on earth” (p. 2). Fortunately, a lot of progress has been made in leadership training and development since Burns wrote.

The best place to begin is with Peter Northouse’s *Leadership: Theory and Practice* (2010), which examines the concept of leadership from a broad range of theoretical perspectives, includes a well-designed leadership inventory or instrument at the conclusion of each chapter, skillfully melds global concepts with practical situations, and provides carefully selected case studies to illustrate the principles explored in the book. Since issues such as shared governance, collegiality, and the unique history of higher education make leadership at a college or university different from leadership in government, at a corporation, in the military, or as part of a voluntary organization, it’s important to complement the ideas that Northouse addresses to those encountered in books devoted to academic leadership. Among the best places to start in this area are books by Wheeler (2008), Leaming (2006), Smith (2006), and Wergin (2006).

The chamber of commerce in your area may run a leadership training program that can introduce you to other important people in your vicinity and learn more about the area in which you live. These programs, frequently called Leadership, followed by the name of the city, county, or state in which they reside, are useful no matter whether you’ve lived in your community all your life or are a recent arrival. In addition to providing training in leadership and team building, the programs will expose

you to aspects of the local economy, cultural life, and government that are difficult to master on your own.

### *Mentors*

Every department chair should have a personal mentor—and every department chair who has been in the position longer than two years should also be a mentor. It's perfectly acceptable to be a mentor and have a mentor at the same time. Academic leaders learn both by the guidance they receive from others and from reflecting on their own experience in order to share it with others. A good mentor is supportive, candid, knowledgeable, available, and challenging, all at the same time. If you work with a mentor who only criticizes what you do, you'll soon get discouraged and give up working with that person. And if you work with a mentor who only tells you how wonderfully you're doing, you could start believing that you're infallible.

The best mentor is someone whom you trust enough to be absolutely straightforward, even when the situation isn't particularly flattering to you, but who isn't looking over his or her shoulder at you every moment. You may want to select a mentor from outside your discipline, perhaps even from another institution, in order to provide appropriate distance from your day-to-day decisions. It may be tempting to ask a former chair who still works in your department, but this practice entails a number of risks. You need to be able to see issues from your own perspective, not from that of the former chair, and you don't want to give your faculty members reason to wonder who's really in charge.

When you serve as a mentor, try to provide advice and an alternative point of view, but don't be insistent that your protégé do things precisely as you would have. Let the person discover his or her own strengths, even if that entails making a small mistake every now and then. After all, that person will need to learn as much as you yourself did. Because of the temptation we all face to want others to run our programs as we've been running them, it's always easier to mentor someone when we have a little bit of distance from their programs or institution.

### *Consultancies and Coaching*

It is also possible to improve your leadership skills by taking advantage of an individually tailored consultancy or coaching. The IDEA Center maintains a Web site that lists the availability of highly experienced consultants in such areas as succeeding as a new chair, improving interpersonal skills,

developing visions and plans for the department, enhancing instruction, preparing a succession plan, and so on ([www.theideacenter.org/helpful-resources/consulting-general/00143-consulting-services](http://www.theideacenter.org/helpful-resources/consulting-general/00143-consulting-services)). In addition, the center offers a coaching service that “provides personalized consultation based on the identified needs of academic department chairs to build leadership skills and maximize talent. Once chairs have completed the IDEA Feedback for Department Chairs instrument, the IDEA Center provides several coaching options to extend and enhance self-reflection and leadership development, through consultation with respected and experienced higher education leaders” (IDEA Chair Coaching Service, 1999). Consultancy and coaching services can be expensive, but they can also be a highly effective way to tailor the specific types of training that chairs receive to their own individual goals and needs.

### Learn by Sharing

If it’s beneficial to share your experiences with someone you’re mentoring, it can be even more beneficial to share your experiences with chairs all over the world:

- Write about some aspect of what you’ve learned from your job for publication in the *Department Chair*, *Academic Leader*, or the *Chronicle of Higher Education*.
- Propose a presentation, workshop, or training session for the K-State Academic Chairperson’s Conference, an administrative panel at the national organization in your discipline, or other chairs at your institution.
- Start a blog about the challenges and opportunities involved in chairing departments today.

By organizing your thoughts for an article or presentation, you’ll think through your ideas in greater detail and discover possibilities you might not have thought of if you hadn’t tried to articulate your advice to others. As every teacher knows, you don’t master a subject until you try to teach it to others. Although you may never have thought of it in this way, administrative leadership is one of your subject areas now, and learning more about it by teaching it to others is an excellent way of growing in your position.

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No two departments are alike, and no two chairs are alike. Because of your personality, experience, and priorities, you’ll do things differently

from your predecessor, and your successor will not be a clone of you. That's actually better for your department and institution because new people bring new ideas and new approaches. But regardless of how different one chair is from another, all chairs share certain challenges because they work in the trenches. It's a mistake to think that chairing a department is something people can do without preparation, planning, and training. Although the type of training that benefits you is likely to differ in many ways from that of other chairs, the important point is to obtain some sort of ongoing training and reflection in order to develop a culture of continual improvement in your work as chair.

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