Department Chair Online Resource Center

Transitions: From Faculty Member to Department Chair

Although department chairs may be loathe to think of themselves as administrators, few would dispute the fact that when they step into that role, their lives change. In its department chair workshops, the American Council on Education administers a questionnaire asking participants about their experience as chairs. One question is, "What has changed in your life in moving from a faculty role to that of a department/program head?"

The observations reported here derive from replies from three groups: 45 respondents from June 1998, 44 from November 1998, and 67 from February 1999 (a total of 156 respondents). Participants came from virtually every state and were predominantly from state comprehensive institutions. I've arranged their replies into three major categories: time, relationships, and personal change.

TIME

More statements were made about the issue of time than any other topic. Seventy-eight respondents cited time as the factor most changed in the shift from faculty member to chair. The specifics of those replies were then divided into subtopics: longer hours, curtailed research, loss of control, and diminution of family time.

More work hours. A typical response was, "The workload has increased dramatically." Workload expansion often bred frustration: "I am spending more time and have less evidence of accomplishment." Some chairs perceived a good deal of busy work, and reported being "behind."

Other chairs achieved a more dispassionate stance. One delivered a coolly clinical assessment that what was involved was a "different work schedule," with changes both in hours and in activities and attention. That seems to be the case for the chair who said, "Much more time is now required on campus for attending many meetings and pushing lots of paper." Another chair offered, "I spend more time on campus, read more on leadership and administration, spend less time on scholarship." These remarks point to a realignment of work and a shift from "private" to "public" work time. The chair is concerned with the campus world beyond the department.

Within the department, chairs' concerns also may change. As one chair put it, "I spend more time focusing on department governance." Another reported, "I have greatly increased the amount of time devoted

to broad departmental issues and to the handling of faculty and student problems." Rather than concentrating on one's personal teaching, research, and students, the chair has to be concerned with the department as a totality.

Curtailed research. Chairs report that there is "much less time for scholarly activities." For some the loss also involves teaching. As one chair stated, "I have less time for teaching, less time for research." Another reported a "steep reduction in my scholarship productivity." Time taken from research and teaching seems to be the greatest source of discomfort to chairs.

Loss of control. Chairs report a loss of control: "I have lost much of my free time," or "I have less control over my time." Another said, "I have lost the ability to plan/manage my time." One exasperated chair stated, "My days are not under my control. I can't walk to the bathroom from my office without at least one meeting!" Another reported, "My life is now often controlled by the rhythm of problems that arise—rather than the predictable ebb and flow of academic life."

Diminution of family time. With loss of control over personal time, there is less time for family and friends. As one chair said, "The two major changes have been less time for my family and myself, and for the first time in my life I do not enjoy my work. Other changes are less time to devote to teaching and my students, which are the major sources of my job satisfaction."

RELATIONSHIPS

What I've reported thus far points to changes in relations with others as one of the transitions commonly experienced by chairs. Although most of the remarks speak to changes in relations with faculty colleagues, chairs note realignment of their interactions with students as well.

Faculty relations. In speaking about faculty colleagues, one chair remarked, "Relations with colleagues have become more complex." Other statements reflect a sense of loss, though some indicate a sense of expanded possibilities. One chair observed, "I have more personal contact with all of the faculty and with chairs from other disciplines." In that case, the chair's universe has expanded from a coterie of friends and associates to encompass all department members. It has also broadened this chair's horizons to include colleagues in other disciplines who share parallel responsibilities.

Chairs report a diminution of collegiality with a significant sense of loss. At the simplest level, one chair reported "changed relationships with colleagues," while another remarked, "Faculty colleagues don't quite treat me the same." Another chair went so far as to say, "I am no longer a colleague." In some cases this changed dynamic generated a sense of isolation for the chair: "Different relationship with faculty—isolation."

For one chair, that sense of isolation is fueled by the fact that, "My colleagues no longer understand what I do." Despite broad differences in how disciplines pursue their inquiries, there is a common understanding of what faculty members do. This chair suggests an exponential shift that occurs when one takes on managerial/administrative responsibilities, and often faculty do not comprehend the nature of that shift. Although working in the same institution, faculty and administration work in different universes shaped by different considerations, standards, and pressures.

Not only are chairs aware of changes in colleague attitudes, some reported altered views of department faculty. One stated, "I now have a view of my colleagues that I wish I did not have." Another said, "I know more about my colleagues than I wanted to know." These remarks indicate that chairs may become more intimately knowledgeable of colleagues' personal problems and dilemmas than they had anticipated. For other chairs, though, this shift has become a part of their role definition. As one chair reported, "I now focus on providing support for the work of others." Another remarked that she is "dealing with faculty problems/crises head on." Chairs are often most comfortable in the role of facilitator and nurturer. For example, one chair stated that his main concern was "to provide a nurturing environment for research, teaching, and collegiality among faculty and to provide support for junior faculty."

Relations with students. Relationships with students also change. As one chair remarked, "my contact with students has changed from the teacher role to advisor, recruiter, problem solver." While one chair reported she was "less student-oriented," another reported "an increase in student contact, evaluation, and assistance." If the absence of all comment about the relationship between chairs and their classroom students is indicative, chairs do not perceive any change in their relationship with their own students. However, they do see a change in the relationship with students at large. As with the chair who remarked, "I have more personal contact with all of the faculty in the department," the same is true with student contact. Again, the chair's horizon broadens beyond his/her students to all students enrolled in the department's courses.

PERSONAL CHANGES

Undoubtedly, the most potent effects of becoming a chair are the alterations and adjustments in the chair as an individual. One word turns up most frequently in chair statements: "stress" and "more stress." In one case, the

chair linked stress and loneliness. Another chair commented, "It is sometimes difficult to stop thinking about chair duties."

Some changes are experienced as losses. For example, one chair reported, "I feel less free to discuss my own opinions at meetings." Another spoke of having to be "careful in what I say, how I say it, and where I say it."

But many chairs also indicate enjoyment of, challenge by, and even exhilaration in their work. One chair said he was "more involved in the whole program." Successful chairs adapt, adjusting their perspective from the particular to the general. Many experience satisfaction from the more comprehensive perspective. As one chair put it, "I have more encompassing involvement in department and college direction." Another said "I have more overview of the department." Still another claimed, "I have more interdepartmental awareness." One chair reported "thinking of people problems (staff, faculty, and students) rather than discipline or research problems."

In this realigned perspective, some chairs find exciting new insights. One chair reported new understanding of "the challenge of the realities of resource constraints and faculty responsiveness." Another indicated an "increased understanding of my profession and higher education."

One chair felt "less driven by the discipline." Another stated, "I now legitimately take multiple perspectives on problems and solutions, and my colleagues appreciate and seek that way of thinking." One chair experienced an epiphany on the subject of responsibility. "As a faculty member, I was responsible only for myself and my designated students. As chair, I am responsible for all of these people."

Many chairs indicated that they were thriving on the challenge. They were pleased with what they were learning, such as "enhanced organizational skills that can transfer to personal life and how I manage." One person said she was "more organized." The opportunity to learn was noted by one respondent who spoke of the "number of connections to positive learning experiences." Another saw a "vast new array of professional opportunities and professional and personal growth, accompanied by increased stress, responsibility, and exposure to conflict." In one case, a chair observed that he had learned to cope with the stress successfully: "My skin is thicker. I am calmer amidst conflict. I am grateful for small miracles." One noted a "greater feeling of empowerment/ confidence," and another spoke of having "grown professionally."

Several chairs cite a sense of positive accomplishment. According to one chair, "I have been able to lead the department and make many innovative ideas work effectively through the use of my faculty. . . . In addition, serving as chair has increased opportunities to administer the department, select and mentor faculty, and serve as a positive model to students, faculty, and the administration." A key attraction of being a chair is certainly "the ability to make a difference," and the "opportunities to effect change."

CONCLUSION

We may not think of becoming a department chair as a major life transition, but it is. At the simplest level, chairs perceive the escalation of time demands as the most onerous change they face. For individuals who as faculty members had near-total control over their schedules, this transition to externally controlled time is an abrupt change. However, behind that quantitative leap lie far more potent and potentially positive issues. The statements from chairs that embody enthusiasm reflect excitement over the expansion of horizons, along with their new-found ability to influence results.

Relational changes are also unsettling. As a peripatetic breed, Americans are reasonably practiced in the need to create new networks of friendship and association as they move from place to place. The unusual feature for chairs is that most of them make a transition in responsibility while remaining in the same work location. It is dismaying to find that relationships can be altered as much by role transitions as by geographic displacement. But by knowing that, new chairs can give thought to restructuring their friendship networks so that they do not lose the personal support they need to work effectively and live happily.

There is no denying that many chairs experience a sense of loss in their new role, particularly in the diminished ability to pursue their professional research. This chant is so pervasive and consistent among chairs that it must be accepted as fact: In becoming a chair, research interests will of necessity be deferred. This matter merits attention not just by the individual but also by the institution. As colleges and universities come to depend ever more on the effectiveness of their department chairs, it behooves administrators to think through with chairs how this particular loss might be mitigated. Is there a way to keep the research engine rolling? Is a chair more in need of a research assistant than of straight secretarial assistance? Are collaborations possible that would help a chair keep a research agenda moving? Is a special leave at the end of a chair's term a way to get a productive researcher back in the groove?

No life choice is totally satisfactory, and there are aspects of chairing a department or program that are negative in their impact. However, it is worth knowing also that there are unsurpassed possibilities for personal and professional growth and achievement.