The Profession

The Academic Department Chair: The Logic of Appeasement

Larry Hubbell and Fred Homer, *University of Wyoming*

How does the department chair cope with the numerous, often contradictory roles that he or she must invariably assume? And how does a department chair allocate resources among faculty members and simultaneously maintain collegiality?

This article was developed through interviews with 23 current and former department chairs and through the authors' experience as chairs, and it seeks to answer these questions. One of the authors has served as a department chair in two departments and one interdisciplinary program; the other has recently become a department chair.

The numerous and often contradictory roles of the department chair are emphasized in the literature by Leslie (1973), Knight and Holen (1985), McKeachie (1975), Spicer and Spicer (1987), Adams (1988), Tucker (1992), Dill (1984) and Carroll (1974). Ehrle suggests that a department chair must always cope with numerous roles and that "a chair's specific roles number from ten to 40" (1975: 678). Those roles include, but are not limited to leader (Dill 1984: 78–80), (Roach 1976: 16), curriculum manager (Tucker 1992: 49), (Spicer and Spicer 1987: 42), budget manager (Wolotkiewicz 1980: 35), (Spicer and Spicer 1987: 49–55), agent of change (Creswell 1990: 25–26), mentor (Creswell 1990: 47–59), mediator (Dill 1984: 80–82), (Tucker 1992: 33–34), entrepreneur (Dill 1984: 88–89), (Tucker 1992: 4), recruiter (McKeachie 1975: 222–223), rule interpreter (Leslie 1973: 423), planner (Tucker 1992: 4) and departmental representative (Roach 1976: 17–19).

Not only are the roles numerous, they also appear to embody contradictory demands. On the one hand, deans expect chairs to be part of the "management team" and therefore loyalty takes on great importance. On the other hand, faculty expect chairs to represent forcefully, if necessary, the views and needs of departments to the deans and to upper management. Ehrle and Beneath, echoing a common sentiment, note that "chairs almost inevitably feel divided loyalties to faculty colleagues and to institutional administrators" and that "part of the magic in the chair's position lies in their ability to 'work both sides of the street'" (1988: 9).

It is no wonder that May and McBeath note: "Yet how many times have you asked yourself, How did I get into this job? or stated, The stress of this job is getting me down." (Bennett and Figuli 1990: 36). Adding to their stress, some colleagues impugn the motives of their appointed supervisor. For example, McKeachie noted that, "In many departments, the attitude of the faculty toward a colleague who accepts the chairmanship is much like that of nuns toward a sister who moves into a house of prostitution" (1975: 221). Although the contradictory roles of the chair are usually portrayed negatively in the literature, our interviews with chairs indicate that this problem can also be an advantage. In an attempt to resolve this role confusion and the problem of resource allocation, this article is part catharsis, part problem-solving exercise. In addition, the authors hope to provide prescriptive advice to those academics who are in the sometimes uncomfortable position of department chair.

A Review of the Literature

Confounding our search for a resolution to these problems was the fact that much of the literature on the subject was off target. It did not explain our experience or the experience of our interviewees. The literature lacked insight on how to deal with everyday departmental difficulties. It did not address the issues of role contradiction and/or resource allocation in a politically astute manner. The following are representative examples of prescriptive advice offered by scholars who specialize in the area of academic administration.

The literature describes two management systems: the rational-analytic approach and the political approach. These are not mutually exclusive approaches, and although many chairs prefer one approach to the other, many employ both. In our estimation, the department chair who employs only the rational-analytic approach makes some naive assumptions regarding the nature of academic administration. This approach ignores the uniquely democratic, non-hierarchical character of many academic organizations, particularly those departments in which academic chairs, rather than academic heads, predominate. This literature recommends the employment of standard management techniques like performance evaluations, merit pay and total quality management that are touted by popular "management gurus" as the panacea for the "sick, underachieving organization." But if one manages an academic department with principles similar to a conventional public or private top-down organization, one would ignore the participatory culture that exists in much of academe.

For example, the authors of a book representative of this genre argue for the "necessity" of collecting and tabulating faculty workload statistics. They also note that faculty may resist this form of data collection. Tuckman and Johnson note:

> The first concern registered by faculty about the use of instructional productivity as a management outcome is the matter of faculty accountability. Discussions of productivity are sensitive because faculty members may associate productivity with factory work and a product as something to be marketed and sold by the institution. They may not see the number of students they teach as relative to their contribution to the organization (1987: 30).

Although these authors provide techniques for evaluating faculty, they ignore the political realities of ranking and evaluating one's peers in order to allocate resources. We have found that the relationship between evaluation and allocation is among the most persistent and agonizing problems chairs face.

In a similar vein, Allan Tucker, author of a widely used text on the department chair entitled *Chairing the Academic Department: Leadership Among Peers*, details an elaborate point system developed by a department at Florida State University (1991: 235–237). The point system provides values for different activities and products in the areas of teaching, research, and service. For example, a professor receives 20 points if student evaluations rank at or above the 90th percentile, but only 8 points, if evaluations rank between the 50th and 59th percentile. In the area of research, a book published by a major publisher receives 15 points, while a book published by a local publisher receives 5 points. Finally, in the area of service, being a member of faculty senate garners 7 points, but being a member of an area or program committee earns one point.

Setting aside the issue of whether these point values measure performance in any meaningful way, there remains the issue of whether a peer can effectively evaluate other peers without causing hard feelings and avoiding departmental acrimony and insurrections. Except for the true positivists, other department chairs might view this mode of evaluation as but the facade of a seemingly objective calculus. It is hard enough to conduct performance evaluations where there is a clear superior-subordinate relationship in place. The task is doubly hard when one must evaluate one's peers. For one who finds fault with the rational-analytic approach, decision-making is more often a test of one's political rather than "objective" skills. In the texts we reviewed, this rational-analytic advice-giving to department chairs does not fully acknowledge this point.

The large body of literature focusing on the political nature of the academic department chair is also unsatisfying. Although this literature currently identifies the academic department chair as the holder of a highly political position, it lacks candor. Based on our interviews and own personal experience, we found that department chairs often take on demeaning tasks, even though, according to Knight and Holen, "department chairpersons are responsible for as much as 80 percent of all administrative decisions made in colleges and universities" (1985: 677). However, Gross and Grambach note that department chairs ranked lowest in power among college administrative officials, lower even than regular faculty members (Riley and Baldridge 1977).

Although department chairs make numerous decisions—which often appear inconsequential—they cannot act with impunity. Most writers who suggest advice to newly appointed chairs argue that they should proceed carefully. Creswell et. al. suggest that newly appointed chairs should "be cautious about making immediate changes" (1990: 25). Walker reminds department chairs that "all governance is ultimately with the consent of the governed" (1979: 12). Wolotkiewicz notes that "in connection with the major administrative functions of the chairman, he must seek the advice of members of the department, individually or as a group, or of advisory committees that he may appoint" (1980: 35). Roach advises department chairs that "school, department, student and faculty interests must be considered and followed. The basic purpose is to serve the needs of the entire constituency to the maximum degree possible" (1976: 21). Finally, Adams notes that the chair's "authority is well circumscribed and what he achieves he does principally by listening and cajoling" (1988: 93). But is this reliance on consensus building and democratic procedures often less a result of a particular chair's inclination than an acknowledgment of political necessity?

Although we found ourselves nodding our heads when we reviewed this literature, we felt it did not truly capture the impossible position that department chairs face. This literature also did not reveal the often demeaning character of a department chair's work. This issue would not be particularly important if department chairs were unessential cogs in the academic administrative machinery. However, according to Ehrle, "The department chairman is one of the most important positions in academe" (1975: 29), but chairs also suffer from having little power.

Effective department chairs can compensate for this power deficit through political adeptness. But what strategy are they most likely to employ? In our judgment, the effective department chair frequently relies on a strategy of appeasement, a term at once popularized and denigrated by conservative Communist-hating Republicans during the 1950s and used by them to characterize left-leaning Democrats. According to Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary to appease means to "PACIFY, CONCILIATE; esp: to buy off (an aggressor) by concessions usu. At the sacrifice of principles" (1979: 54). Depending upon their relative personal and/or institutional strength, effective department chairs rely more or less on this strategy. However, we argue that this strategy, although often veiled in high sounding rationalizations, is commonly used. This strategy is not revealed because it is a rather embarrassing admission and in some people's minds makes the management sciences appear to be so much less scientific.

The Department Chair: The Manager Caught In-Between

Ehrle and Bennett indicate that chairs are challenged by the issue of divided loyalty (1988: 10). This problem of divided loyalty is most evident in how chairs handle relations between their deans and department members. This issue would not be so challenging if there was not almost inherent conflict between many deans and their faculty - a conflict something like the often competing interests of management and labor. Adams presents one typical, if hyperbolic, perception that faculty members hold of their deans. He writes, "The dean is a creature with large teeth and a paucity of thought, who is suspected of actually enjoying his work, having been acclimated to darkness in a previous chairmanship and now owl-like in the light" (1988: 92).

On the one hand, chairs, serving as conduits for the faculty, sometimes deliver to deans what chairs may believe to be irresponsible demands. On the other hand, chairs may be asked by their deans to impose restrictive demands upon the faculty. But many of the chairs we interviewed perceived the conflict between faculty and deans to be an opportunity rather than a problem. For example, the chair often enjoys exclusive access to the dean. This enables the chair to deliver unenthusiastically the "irresponsible demand" to the dean ensuring that the dean will turn it down. Alternatively, a chair may present the dean with a request unpopular with the department, but one the chair favors, as a *fait accompli* from the dean. This virtually ensures the department's compliance with the request, but absolves the chair of responsibility.

This enables the chair to maintain harmony in the department through the creation of an external foe. In a perverse way, this strategy of blaming the dean enables the chair to create a very tenuous community among frequently headstrong and individualistic academics. For this reason and other reasons of the dean's making, it is not surprising that many deans are disliked by their faculty members. This approach to department-dean relations and our

depiction in the next section of the department chair as wily resource manager are central to many department chairs' strategy of appeasement.

The Department Chair: The Wily Resource Manager

The literature and our interviews point to four predominant resource management styles that chairs employ: the burnout, the rational strategist, the rogue, and the appeaser. These styles refer to the chair's important role in the allocation of resources, a role that takes up a great deal of time and psychic energy.

Less Favored Resource Management Styles: The "burnout" is a person who regularly turns down the opportunity to garner resources that must be divided among competing department members. The burnout is generally unavailable to faculty, particularly when resources must be allocated, and does little to prepare department members for a "division of the spoils."

Some department chairs prefer the rational style, because they prefer to use rational criteria to divide resources, including the most crucial allocation - the annual salary increase. What differentiates the rational strategist from other resource management styles is the "objective" measures that can quantify merit among faculty members. The rational strategist can discern equality among people and dispense resources equally. Through this strategy, one can discern those who are unequal and distribute resources proportionally. The rational strategist often employs quantitative methods to allocate salary increases, office space, equipment, and a myriad of other scarce resources.

Most of the chairs we interviewed did not rely heavily on the rational measures. They believed these measures were inadequate for decision-making because of subjective political realities. Furthermore, depending upon the mindset of department members, "objective" measures may not have legitimacy within a department. However, we suspect that the closer one gets to the sciences, the

more likely chairs adopt rational criteria.

Of course, the rational model, if it is accepted by the faculty, makes the chair's job much easier and even distances the chair somewhat from the consequences of a particular decision. For instance, most chairs learn to appreciate those years when they have little or no pay raise money to distribute or are instructed to give across-the-board raises, thus limiting their discretion, and hence their responsibility, for the allocation.

Some chairs can be characterized as rogues. They relish doling out differential rewards and may enjoy depriving others they deem less worthy. Some rogues operate according to Polemarchus' suggestion in *The Republic* that justice means rewarding one's friends and punishing one's enemies. This style may be employed with some effectiveness in a hopelessly divided department to bolster the dominant alliance, or a chair may use it out of sheer perversity. Most of those we interviewed backed away from roguishness because they know enemies can be assuaged. Besides, scorned enemies can perpetrate mischief and mayhem.

The Predominant Resource Management Style: The preferred style for most of the chairs we interviewed was that of the appeaser. Such chairs indicate that their highest priority is establishing and maintaining harmonious relations within the department. They place much less emphasis on rational standards, believing that clear-cut decisions can be problematic to the chair and department members. For example, how does a chair with money for six new computers allocate them among eight faculty members who profess a need? What criteria should be used to evaluate members for teaching awards? On what basis does the chair allocate office space?

The management orientation of the appeaser becomes this: Discover the primary "needs" of each department member and try to promote harmony and happiness by satisfying those "needs." In attempting to satisfy department members, the chair usually deals with the following three groups of faculty: the satisfied, the

normal demanders, and the greedy. The satisfied may have a variety of motives: they may demand little, so little is expected of them; they may be politically naive; or they may be so independent that they eschew collective help. The satisfied are the the easiest to please. Some appeasers choose to divert resources from them and funnel these resources to either the normal demanders or especially the greedy.

The normal demanders give the chair some leeway regarding the distribution of resources. Often the chair can appeal to their sense of fairness and community and win them over by playing the "scarcity card." Their demands tend to be more sporadic and less grandiose than the greedy. The effective appeaser is well aware of the normal demanders' hot buttons and their zones of indifference.

Most department chairs feel that half of their management time and almost all of their psychic energy are taken up by the greedy. The greedy constantly demand "an audience," monitor the chair's every action, and frequently need their egos stroked. They want to be reminded that they are doing a superior job, and rewards are therefore important. The greedy might simply be cranky, or they may be malevolent troublemakers. Obviously, the troublemaker can drain much of the chair's time and resources, or even organize the greedy.

One strategy for maintaining harmony is to be secretive about available resources and their distribution. For example, one of the authors has a friend in a biochemistry department who has always professed satisfaction with the way he was treated by the department chair. All his annual evaluations were sparkling. When one of the faculty members surreptitiously printed and published his department's salaries, he discovered that he made less money than anyone else. Our colleague should not have been surprised that the hyperbole in his annual evaluations did not accurately reflect his monetary worth - the bottom line in the eyes of the department chair. The appeaser will almost always resort to such hyperbole. If anything is free, abundant, and not subject to zero-sum allocations, it is praise.

In another instance, a department chair had to rank sabbatical proposals of several department members. At this university, it is common that faculty members who apply for sabbaticals receive them. However, despite the reality that almost everyone who applies for sabbaticals receives them, no faculty member likes to be ranked below a colleague. Thus, the chair was faced with the following problems: Could she keep her ranking secret? How could she devise the criteria for ranking so that all applicants are ranked relatively close to one another, in case the applicants find out their ranking from some other source?

Depending upon the organizational culture of the department, some department chairs are less forthcoming than others regarding budgets. For example, in some departments, particularly large departments, budgetary decision-making is more likely to be made by the faculty as a whole or by a designated budget committee. In this organizational culture, the chair's already weak basis for power is further diminished. However, a budget committee can also serve to diffuse responsibility for unpleasant decisions, particularly those regarding salary. All the better for the chair who chooses to convene the budget committee only infrequently so as not to diminish his or her power.

Other department chairs who have the decision-making authority, tell faculty what funds are available for travel, equipment, and salary. This chair becomes more vulnerable to the competing demands of faculty. However, those chairs who keep the level of resources secret, have more discretion to negotiate and are more likely to plead scarcity when working individual deals with department members.

The greedy are insatiable. They could be given all the raise money available in the department and still feel aggrieved. Every chair we interviewed provided details of at least one greedy department member. The greedy members always create the problem of scarcity for the chair, no matter how many resources are available. The normal demanders usually understand that they will "get their fair share" of scarce re-

sources and the satisfied normally do not care.

The greedy can be treated in several ways. If the chair chooses to cut them off, she risks the chance that they will become obstructionists. One interviewee, who we judge to be an experienced chair, warned against this strategy. This chair suggested that other chairs not use their limited powers to punish the greedy ones. He justified his approach by advising that those who are punished are much less likely to produce. This chair implied that the punished were much more likely to foment dissent or even open revolt.

If the chair chooses to provide the greedy with a fair share, it will often be viewed by the greedy as a punishment. Most chairs choose to overcompensate the greedy and attempt to buy their silence. However, chairs who adopt this strategy risk inflating the greedy department members' perceived worth and thereby make their demands even more insatiable. Therefore, this strategy usually fails because the greedy's perception of their abilities and performance far overestimates their actual contributions. For example, one chair told us of an instance in which a greedy department member was given a cash award by the chair. Rather than expressing thanks for the award, the member chose to file a grievance against the department chair because the award was announced to her in the form of a memorandum rather than a letter.

We have discussed the appeasing chair's political strategies including the use of secrecy and how satisfying subjective needs can bring about harmony, which serves as a standard of justice. The appeaser's standard of justice strains to treat equals equally and treats unequals according to their respective "merit".

Two tactics were employed by our chairs for treating "equals" equally. One chair admitted that he formulated a rational model for salary distribution and other forms of resource allocation. Accordingly, he created indicators to quantify teaching, research, and service so that he could more easily manipulate and satisfy a greedy member. The greedy member would always grumble about the outcome, but this seem-

ingly rational formulation made it easier for the chair to hide behind the numbers. Thus, the wily appeaser can make effective tactical use of the rational approach.

The chair can also choose to hide behind tradition. A system put in place by one's predecessor already may have legitimacy and, most importantly, it shifts decision-making responsibility away from the chair. For example, one department had a tradition of awarding an across-the-board salary increase based on an equal percentage increase. In another department, some researchers who have for years been deemed to be prolific by the chair and others, consistently receive much higher salary increases and resources irrespective of annual productivity. Still another department had the tradition of awarding differential annual salary increases, yet ensured that percentage increases over a three year period would remain relatively equal. Indeed, any changes in the historical pattern for distributing salary increases or other resources can lead to dissatisfied faculty members.

Conclusion

The appeasing strategy is not an altogether appealing one. Indeed, the chairs admitted that they employed it with some embarrassment. Yet this strategy did seem to reflect the dominant operating mode of the chairs we interviewed. Since most chairs we interviewed chose not to pursue an administrative career, most of them are statesmen who

rule and eventually return to the ranks of the ruled. For this reason, we suspect that among the chairs we interviewed there were few rogues or burnouts.

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About the Authors

Larry Hubbell is associate professor and chair, department political science at the University of Wyoming. **Fred Homer** is professor and former department chair at the University of Wyoming. They have collaborated on several articles that have been published in *Public Voices* and the *Journal of Public Administration Education* and are presently writing a book on educational administration.

Choosing a Dissertation Topic

Bert Useem, *University of New Mexico*

A graduate career begins by consuming knowledge, and ends by producing it. Choosing one's contribution—the dissertation topic—should be guided foremost by one's intellectual interests. Yet this is a personal, somewhat arbitrary matter. There might be a good reason why one student focuses on international trade and another on the drug trade. But, as elsewhere, there is no accounting for taste.

There are, however, several less subjective considerations that should be taken into account in deciding upon a topic. They include tractability, resonance with organizational culture, learning a new methodology, contribution to knowledge, and assistance in a job search.