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Advice from Former Department Chairs: Qualitative Perspectives

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Abstract: *In the present phenomenological qualitative research study, we conducted interviews with 14 professors whom returned to full-time faculty positions after having served in department chair positions at a Midwest, comprehensive, private university. Interviews explored the professors' experiences as they reflected on their time working as chair, and we asked them for advice they would share with aspiring, future department chairs. Three themes emerged from analyzing the transcripts of our semi-structured interviews: transparency in leadership, advice regarding the difficulty of organizing unpredictable situations, and the chair role of being a temporary facilitator. The present study provides insight to current faculty members who have potential interests in pursuing future department chair roles. Many new department heads receiving little training, development, or mentoring prior to receiving their first chair appointment. Consequently, hearing the perspectives of former chairs can help shorten the new chairs' respective learning curves and may potentially facilitate the new chairs' own successful tenures.*

Key Words: Department chairs; administration; college teaching; qualitative research

ADVICE FROM FORMER DEPARTMENT CHAIRS: QUALITATIVE PERSPECTIVES

Stepping into the position of a university department head can involve a significant shift in expectations, obligations, and interactions. Therefore, guidance from former department heads potentially could be of helpful use to new department chairs, especially for individuals who have not previously served in this role. Based on this assumption, we have summarized three common recommendations that former heads made for individuals entering new chair roles in the present study.

Block (2014) addresses the complexity and conflict with which department heads are often forced to engage. Based on her observations, she urges department chairs, not only to recognize that conflicts will arise, but to proactively work in order to establish collaboration and unity within a department. Establishing effective lines of communication between other members of the department and increasing department loyalty, not only can serve to diminish some of the frustration and stress that conflict and ambiguity create in a department, but can aid in the processes of crafting effective university policy and utilizing available resources.

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Bryman (2007) outlines a variety of effective leadership characteristics within a university setting. His literature review suggests that effective supervisors should be deliberate in explaining the direction and goals of the department under their leadership. Likewise, managers should strive to be clear and honest in their communication with those whom they are serving. Furthermore, effective leaders should base the work they do and decisions they make, not on their own desires, but on the good of the department and its members.

Lending further support to the relationship between leadership style and department success, Bateh (2014) assessed the relationship between leadership styles of academic leaders and reported job satisfaction of full-time faculty members. The results showed a significant relationship to exist between transformational, transactional, and passive/avoidant leadership styles and job satisfaction (as reported by a job satisfaction survey). Based on these findings, Bateh advises that academic leaders strive to improve their respective awareness levels, regarding how they lead their departments, and deliberately refine their styles of leadership to increase job satisfaction throughout the department.

According to Hempsall (2014), operating as an ideal leader in higher education requires relationships that involve multiple aspects. These relationships should include effective sharing of ideas and cooperation with other department members. Instead of commanding and controlling, leaders should try to be aware of the thoughts and perceptions of others and incorporate these factors into the decision and leadership process. Horn, du Plessis, and Nkomo, (2016) affirmed this idea that the relationship between department leaders and those who they are leading is essential to the development and success of faculty members. The quality of this leader-follower relationship played a determining role in whether faculty members felt that their leaders significantly contributed to their professional growth and development.

McFarlane (2011) described a number of constituent roles in which effective intellectual leaders may find themselves serving. These conditions include working as a mentor, a role model, guardian, ambassador, and inquisitor. Recognizing that serving in these various capacities may be required as a department head—and seeking to fulfill them deliberately and effectively—may, therefore, be important for a department chair's success. Cleverley-Thompson (2016) affirmed this conclusion, suggesting that successful academic leaders must serve in the capacities of both team-builder and surveyor, seeking out opportunities in which department members may find personal and professional growth.

DeLander (2017) outlines a number of principles which current and future department heads may find useful for their time within this capacity. Successful department heads should abrogate their own ego and personal wants, instead seeking to further the vision of the faculty. Additionally, they should strive to openly listen to feedback from their colleagues within the department. This may entail dealing with criticism or even opposition; but, successful chairs should not ignore this type of feedback; instead, they should seek out honest responses, even concerns that colleagues may be too cordial to relay directly.

Bailey, Lipscomb, Gorestein, Wilkinson, and Sanfilippo (2017) emphasize a common aspect of working as department chair—that Delander (2017) also discusses: the significant degree of stress and frustration which department heads often face. Bailey et al. (2017) noted that stress in this position can result from a number of causes, mentioning that changes in vision or leadership within a department—as well as misalignments between departments—can cause such a large amount of stress and frustration that it may lead them to step down from a chair position. Due to the negative impact of this stress, Delander recommends that department heads strive to care for their own wellbeing, as well as rely on the expertise and guidance of others (when appropriate).

Gmelch, Roberts, Ward, and Hirsch (2017) analyzed information regarding the motivations, functions, stress, and training of department chairs. Based on this data, they concluded that deliberate effort must be taken in order to effectively address the stress of working as chair and maintaining an appropriate balance between work and personal life. This process, for example, may involve a planned break at the end of an administrative term. Furthermore, they formulated a number of other recommendations for current and future department chairs that included waiting until tenure has been granted in order to become department chair, taking time to learn how to fulfill the position effectively, and seeking out a network of confidants, family members, and mentors who can provide guidance and direction. A final conclusion of Gmelch et al. (2017) was that chairs should intentionally consider their legacy—how they want to be remembered and the difference they are setting out to make.

As noted from the above literature review, we were relatively surprised at how few empirical investigations have been published in peer-reviewed journals regarding the role of department chairs. As readily seen, most of the published articles are opinion pieces by sole authors which are published as conceptual articles. Naturally, such publications have their valuable place in higher education. Our own intention, however, was to obtain the perspectives of multiple former department chairs and explore their collective insight. As such, the perspective of a single author (or even a few authors) is valuable; but, we believe that it is particularly helpful to learn what potential consensus exists among former department chairs. That is, what commonalities exist among individuals who have previously served in the role of department head?

Toward that end, we report the results of an empirical investigation, in the present article—compared to a purely conceptual piece. We were interested to conduct an in-depth investigation regarding how former chairs viewed their roles and what consequent advice they would offer to future, aspiring department chairs. Our present study differs from previously published literature, since we report the consensus of many individuals who had served in the role and the commonalities among their respective perspectives. Using a qualitative research method allowed us to obtain "thick descriptions" (Sergi & Hallin, 2011) of these individuals and to report common themes among the various interviewees. As such, Creswell (2018) would consider the present investigation to be a phenomenological qualitative research study, whereby our objective was to report the phenomenological perspectives of past department chairs—from their own vantage points. Silverman and Marvasti (2018) indicate that such an approach often is the preferred research method in cases where relatively few empirical publications already exist regarding a research construct.

Method

Participants

The participants in the present study were 14 individuals who served as professors at a Midwestern, comprehensive, private university, and who previously had served as a department chair (in a few cases, the individual had possessed the title "dean;" however, at this particular university, deans and chairs possess identical roles—the respective titles demarcate whether or not the department offers a graduate degree) before having stepped down from the position into a full-time faculty role. Using criterion sampling (Harsh, 2011), participants were selected by reviewing university archives in order to determine which professors met the participant criterion, and professors that met this description were emailed and asked to participate in the study. There was no attrition in the study—since all identified participants agreed to be interviewed. All names that are used in the present article, for the purpose of improved readability, are pseudonyms.

In total, we interviewed 14 participants at which point data collection ceased because we determined that saturation of the sample had been achieved. Saturation (Bowen, 2008) occurs when new participants repeatedly express the same concepts that prior participants reported without conveying any new ideas that are substantially different. Qualitative experts such as Guest, Bunce, and Johnson (2006) suggest that this type of saturation implies the sample size of a qualitative study is adequate for the intended purpose.

Participants' ages ranged from 39-79 years old and the gender breakdown of our sample included 13 males and one female. The participants represented a variety of academic departments, including engineering and computer science, education, theological studies, business administration, history and government, music, and nursing. Although these professors served in different departments, they had similar responsibilities and commitments while serving as chair. Our participants possessed significant teaching experience, ranging from 22-54 years (mean = 39 years). As a result, all of our participants reported possessing a substantial first-hand understanding of the politics and structure of academia. The decision to step down from the position of department head was voluntary for half of our participants, and, for the other half, it was not. However, while it is likely that individuals of these groups experienced different transitional experiences due to this factor, this dynamic was neither a focus nor a significant finding of our present project.

PROCEDURE

As noted earlier, the present study was designed to be a phenomenological qualitative study, which studies a construct as perceived by the respective participants. While we were interested in knowing about the former chairs' professional skills, personal wellbeing, and professional and personal relationships—we gave special and explicit attention to the advice that these former chairs said they would offer to future, aspiring department heads. Within this context, we conducted semi-structured interviews (Alvesson, 2011) in order to provide participants with a substantial amount of freedom in sharing their own personal experiences. This type of interview allows participants to guide the interview at times and, consequently, provide a richer description of their experience than typically can be obtained in more structured interviews. The general constructs we chose to explore included advice to others, continued fulfillment, potential regrets, difficulties adjusting to power loss, and advice to future chairs. Audios of the interviews were tape recorded and transcribed for further analysis. We used Maxwell's (2011) open coding strategy for data analysis—meaning we did not start with a set of codes that we wanted to find in the data. Rather, we approached the study inductively by constantly comparing various transcripts and identifying recurring words, phrases, and concepts (Silverman, 2011). Based on these repeated features, we developed a list of commonly shared concepts and characteristics relating to advice purported by the former chairs.

Multiple methods were implemented in order to enhance the internal validity of the present study. Specifically, the generation of a data audit (Rodgers, 2008) helped to ensure that the reported results accurately reflected the sentiments of the professors interviewed, rather than our own imposed interpretations of their experiences. Sometimes also referred to as being a data trail, we copy/pasted all the relevant quotes from the respective transcripts and placed them under the major findings reported in the present study. The process helps to ensure that sufficient qualitative data exists in order to justify the presented findings. The use of member checking (Mero-Jaffe,

2011) also helped to ensure the legitimacy of our findings. The member checking process involved sharing the findings of the study with the research participants so that they could either affirm or reject the themes we identified. In all cases, the participants in the study confirmed the reported themes as accurate descriptions of their experience.

We also used an independent expert reviewer (Silverman, 2011) in order to ensure that appropriate qualitative protocol was followed and that the identified themes were sufficiently grounded in the collected data. This expert was not a part the study's interviews or data analysis; rather, he reviewed each respective phase of the study in order to ensure that proper protocol was being followed. Finally, the present study's internal validity was enhanced through the use of low inference descriptors (Chenail, 2012). This means that, when writing the results of the study, ample quotations from the interview transcripts were used in order to illustrate the findings. This process helps to ensure that the reported results accurately reflect the participants' perspectives and aids readers in understanding the tone and context of the participants' statements.

RESULTS

Due to pagination limitations, we were unable to relate all the results from our data set in a single journal article. Consequently, in other publications, we presented the results from the data set in order to discuss professional and affective residual effects of former department chairs (Firmin, Kohli, Chuang, & Dosier, 2018a) and forward professional outlooks (Firmin, Kohli, Chuang, & Dosier, 2018b). In the present article, we address advice that the former department chairs in our study provided for future professors who will serve in similar roles. These themes include being transparent in leadership, organizing unpredictable situations, and framing the chair role as a temporary facilitator.

TRANSPARENCY IN LEADERSHIP

Almost every former department chair in our study, using a variety of words and examples, indicated that being transparent in leadership is a recommendation they would make for aspiring future department chairs. Interviewees indicated that being both, genuine and exercising a healthy communication pattern with their respective faculty members, helped to build morale. Having a healthy morale, in turn, was said to have been a significant overall contribution to the department chair role. Adam, for example, expressed the sentiments of most interviewees regarding this point when he stated: "Do the very best you can to get them to understand why you are doing things the way you're doing them, why you've made the decisions you had to make, and get them to understand—and come along."

Along with this point, the department chairs noted that they worked intentionally in order to convince their faculty members to believe in the direction that they wanted to lead their departments. Rather than proverbially having faculty members persuaded against their respective wills, they instead advised new chairs to develop communication patterns that encouraged faculty members to see the potential benefits of following the chairs' lead. The department heads said that they seldom had complete unity regarding new initiatives but that they tried to obtain a consensus among their various departmental faculty. Achieving this type of dynamic was enhanced, according to the former chairs in our study, through transparent communication. Eric related the sentiment that was common among the interviewees on this point in the following way:

> I think another thing I would share is just the importance of being able to work towards achieving the buy-in of your team and allow people the ability to express their opinions—whether they're in favor of something or whether they're expressing concern—but letting people listen and in a decision-making process, giving people time to allow group consensus to build, because—when you have that in place and then you move—it's typically more successful.

Additionally, regarding the present finding, the faculty members reportedly were able to trust the respective former chairs better, after having heard the *rationale* supporting their decisions. Rationale such as, "because I am the chair," obviously does not build trust nor does it lead to faculty members "buying in" to the direction desired by the chair. In stark contrast, the research participants indicated that faculty members generally will follow the lead of chairs when the faculty members can clearly see a reasonable rational for the desired direction. Timothy related the perspective in the following manner: "But you need to make sure that everybody understands why decisions were made as they were—and why we ended up with whatever the consequences were from the decision."

According to the former chairs we interviewed for the present study, general faculty members will attempt to generate their own reasons for various chair decisions—when the "true" rationale is not shared by the respective department chairs. The problem, evidently, is that faculty members' assumptions do not always square with reality. Consequently, the former chairs recommend that new chairs take time in order to explicitly communicate their rationales for various decisions and to explicitly articulate the reasons why various potential benefits are expected to outweigh potential liabilities involved with chair decisions. Carl stated this general sentiment in the following manner: "Be as transparent with people that you're leading in your department as you can—so that there's no guessing on their part in regards to your motives—because you're going to be in a position as a leader, to have to make decisions."

Organization of Unpredictable Situations

A common theme among most of the department chairs in our study was a perceived need to prepare for frustrations and complications that frequently come to them from multiple sources. Aaron captured this general sentiment with the following word picture: "When you are depending on so many other people—to meet deadlines and get your information-data by a certain time—it can be real frustrating. It's like herding cats." Although only a few former chairs in our study used the specific word picture of "herding cats," the concept was related frequently—by most of the interviewees. The idea is that the chair role most often is *not* linear; information does not come from one direction—in a relatively predictable straight line. Rather, needed data exists and arrives from multiple dimensions and sources. This dynamic is one for which new chairs may not innately be prepared, and the former chairs suggest that future chairs prepare themselves and take affirmative action that will help potentially reduce their frustrations with this dynamic.

Tandem with this point is the fact that chairs noted they serve two very distinct groups of individuals. On the one hand, they represent their respective faculty members to the administration. At the same time, however, the chairs also represent administrators who have made decisions that must be implemented by the respective faculty members. Joel commented: "Also, to be aware of the impact of pressure because you're serving two groups of people. You're serving your colleagues, but you're also serving those administrators that are your superiors. Being sensitive to the needs of both of those groups of people and being able to seek wisdom for the best way to do that." The former department chairs in our study did not offer a panacea regarding this dynamic; one does not likely exist for all chairs in all conditions. Nonetheless, they indicated that being aware of the phenomenon is essential and that a significant part of their chair responsibilities involved being a go-between among these two groups and learning to successfully negotiate between them. Carl provided a description of what this dynamic often was like for chairs:

> I think listening is a harder thing to do than speaking for most people, especially as a department chair. You get information from other people, and your responsibility often times is to transmit it to the other members of your department. You always have that information to give people. The challenging part is to be able to hear them [departmental faculty], as they think about it from their perspective, because they're the ones that have to put it into practice, they're the individuals who have to apply the things, the policies, the assessments, the procedures. To be able to hear what they might think is the challenge and maybe help them work through that challenge or to take that challenge and report it back to the people who made the policy and say: "This might be problematic, you need to rethink this." So, I think a good department chair is a conduit of listening to what administrators have on their hearts—whether it be a policy or, when doing things—and then listening to faculty as they think about the implications of those things and trying to do the best for both.

And finally, a particular frustration that most of the interviewees noted related to the present theme is that new chairs need to brace themselves for times when they will be placed in very uncomfortable positions. As just noted, chairs have dual-role responsibilities—duties to both to their faculty and to the administration. At the same time, however, they serve in their respective chair roles at the pleasure of the administration, so that is the group which ultimately must be pleased with their work as department chair. Mark related this concern to aspiring chairs in the following way: "I tried to think, 'Okay, I'll try to please [the upper-administration] and I'll try to do what they want me to do—even though I just really don't think this is a good idea.' I tried to do it well but, in the end, it wasn't really a very good idea. But I paid for it, because I was the face behind the decision." At the frustration's end, the interviewees' advice to new chairs is to please the administration by doing the best that they can do with the dynamics at play. We did not explicitly ask the participants in the present study: "What was your biggest frustration?" Nonetheless, implementing policies of administrators—about which the chairs did not agree—was the most frequently mentioned challenge, and the one about which they communicated the most salient caveats to future aspiring department chairs. Luke illustrated this phenomenon as follows:

> That was probably my biggest challenge—working with people because I was always having to do something that the administration wanted me to do—and I didn't necessarily think was a good idea. So, it was a really big challenge: Doing something they wanted me to do and I just thought, "You know what, that is not going to work—let me just tell you something, it's not going to work." "We don't care, do it anyway." And then trying to get the people that I had oversight of, getting them to understand: "Okay, we got to give this a try." "But it'll never work, you know it'll never work, why are you asking us to do it?" "Because the

> administration really wants us to give it a try, let's give it a good try, let's see if we can give it a go, let's just see where it takes us." That was hard. That was exceptionally difficult.

Frame the Chair Role as being a Temporary Facilitator

The third element that was common among most of the individuals in our sample regarded how aspiring chairs should frame their desired roles. In particular, the experienced chairs suggested that the aspirants not view the role as something that primarily is about "them." Rather, they should view the chair role as a means of helping others develop, a way to accomplish good for the department, and the role of a facilitator among a highly qualified group of people. Elliot captured this sentiment when he described the following:

> Probably, the most important thing I think about being a chair is that you realize that you are not the smartest person in the room and that you make it your goal to facilitate and to get all the strengths of the smart people who work for you to use their creativity. You have to make sure you provide an atmosphere where they feel free to do that.

In this paradigm, aspiring future chairs are encouraged not to focus on whatever significant abilities they currently possess or the accomplishments that they have acquired (e.g., productive scholarly record). Rather, success as a chair involves the ability to size-up the skills and abilities of the faculty in the department and then to leverage those respective strengths. The proverbial whole can be greater than the sum of its parts—if the chair is successful—from the perspectives of the former chairs we interviewed. Allen stated the sentiment shared by most of the interviewees, using the following metaphor:

> I think that one of the opportunities that you have in an academic leadership position is that you can get a lot of things done that are bigger than what you can do just in your own classroom or with your own students. It's like the difference between a musician playing solo and a conductor leading a whole orchestra; there are things that the conductor can do that are more than what the individual instruments can do.

Intertwined with the above sentiment was the common assertion (i.e., among all the participants) that aspiring chairs should view the role as not being about themselves per se, but rather about accomplishing the greater good. David stated forthrightly, for example: "You have to come to grips really quickly—to the idea that this institution is a lot bigger than me. It's more important that my department be successful than 'John Doe' be successful…" The consensus among our participants was that individuals who are highly self-centered likely will not make successful department chairs.

Although none of the previous chairs used the phrase "self-sacrificial," that general construct was repeated throughout the interviews. The interviewees spoke of putting department needs before the chair's personal needs, making decisions that were based on the department's own best interests rather than personal preferences. This involved spending significant amounts of "personal time" on the job, particularly during stressful periods. The chairs communicated that, if a faculty member pursued a chair role mostly for personal glory, a non-optimistic ending was predicted for that faculty member. Rather, than "owning" the role, many of the chairs we interviewed rather framed themselves as being a good curator of the chair role. Stanley illustrated this point when he stated:

> It's not a sense of the chair ever really belonged to me, I was simply a steward for a period of time. It's like, if you asked me to keep your car for a week. It's giving the keys back—that's not going to be breaking my heart, it's just giving it back to the person it belongs to. Hopefully the car is in as good a shape as when you gave it to me.

Discussion

The results of our study both underline and elaborate upon a number of themes that were present within the article's review of the relevant literature. The fact that nearly every participant in our study emphasized the importance of transparent and honest communication as a department head supports the recommendations of Block (2014) and Bryman (2007) to develop these qualities. Our findings both affirm that this communication style is important for department leadership and highlight specific ways in which this quality is beneficial: Transparent communication is essential to garner the support of department members. Understanding the rationale behind various decisions was said to have gone a long way in promoting department unity and support. Furthermore, while poor communication may be perceived as prevarication, transparent expression demonstrates that department heads are confident and forthright with their motivations. Based on this finding, current and future department heads may want to consider tailoring their communication, not just toward clear communication, but also toward the specific goal of effectively articulating their reasoning and motivations. Based on the present study's findings, chairs would benefit from continually monitoring, not only what they say, but also how their statements are perceived

Furthermore, both Block (2014) and Gmelch, et al. (2017) emphasized the complexity and stress that department heads often face. Our findings affirm that this dynamic was said to have been a consistent experience of department heads—and furthermore—connects this finding with the observations of Bailey et al. (2017) who reported that chairs often must mediate between individuals and even departments whose goals are essentially orthogonal. Specifically, participants reported that much of the stress involved in the role of department chair directly resulted from dealing with these conflicts. Therefore, department heads who seek to reduce the stress they experience in the position, as well as the consequences these conflicts have for the department, should seek to ameliorate such conflicts directly. This finding supports McFarlane's (2010) so-called role of chair-as-ambassador, since heads may need to be deliberate in communicating the needs and perspectives of various parties.

In fact, the role just mentioned is similar (in many aspects) to the role-of-facilitator, as emphasized by the present study's participants. Our findings indicate that, rather than acting as a dictator or king/queen, department heads should seek to serve as a communicator-and-organizer among colleagues, enabling cooperation toward common goals. The emphasis which many interviewees placed on supporting the ideas and goals of department peers is in line with the findings of DeLander (2017), who asserted that effective department heads may need to reject their own personal wants to realize the desires of their peers. Our present findings advance this generalized principle, since our participants provide some rich descriptions regarding how this dynamic might look/feel in higher education contexts.

Likewise, the role of facilitator shares many aspects with the roles of team-builder and surveyor, as described by Cleverley-Thompson (2016). Team-building entails deliberately enhancing communication and cooperation through transparent communication; effective facilitation within a department requires surveying the wants and needs of its members. In this way, the role of an effective facilitator, as emphasized by the present study's participants, contains many of the salient aspects described in prior research regarding an effective department head, and may serve as a summative quality toward which individuals within this role may strive.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

As mentioned, all 14 participants in the present study worked as professors at a Midwestern, comprehensive, private university at the time of interviewing. We chose to select participants from this specific cohort in an effort to enhance internal validity due to homogeneity (Firmin, 2006), but future studies on this topic at universities with different distinguishing features (public, community, research-focused, etc.) could serve to validate the findings of the present study. This phenomenon is, in part, due to the fact that interviewees referenced workplace factors that may be somewhat unique to the specific university from which we selected participants. Furthermore, similar studies which sample from diverse universities could yield distinct and valuable findings that were not observed in the present study due to this limitation.

Additionally, given that all participants were Caucasian, similar studies of minority former chairs may yield highly valuable findings. Similarly, the paucity of female participants within this study may have limited our findings. Future studies which focus specifically on female former department heads could significantly augment the finding of the present study.

Due to the context-oriented nature of qualitative research, replication across context, sample, and periods of time are essential to establishing the external validity of its findings (Miller, 2008). Therefore, we feel the present study provides substantial insights regarding this topic which, if combined with similar future research, through comparison and meta-analysis, will produce a significant "big-picture" view of the department chair transitional experience. Establishing patterns and disparities between the findings of the present study and those of future studies (involving different sample populations) can therefore prove to be an important endeavor.

Furthermore, our study did not address the reasons for which participants left their respective positions of department chair. As a result, future studies should incorporate this element into future studies of department heads. Finally, all participants assumed professorial roles after having stepped down from their respective chair positions. Therefore, future studies should assess participants who move into upper-level administrative positions and compare those findings with the results of the present study.

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