

“First and foremost, chairs must realize that they are no longer individuals driven by their own research, teaching and service. As chairs, they now assume a ‘role’ that has its own skill sets, goals and dispositions.” – Don Chu, *HigherEdJobs* (May 2012)

WHAT IT IS LIKE TO BE HEAD OF A UNIVERSITY DEPARTMENT

By Bruce L. McManis



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Introduction

Becoming an academic department head is one career path that some faculty see in their future. It can be a step in the direction of becoming a dean, vice president, or president. This essay is a reflection of my experiences and observations as a twenty year department head under four different deans. I hope that it conveys the good, the bad, and the ugly of the role of a department head.

How do you become a department head?

There is a lot of variability in the answer to this question. Common approaches are the dean makes a choice, a vote of the involved faculty, and rotation. In a rotation system each faculty member takes the responsibilities for a period of two or three years. Generally in a rotation system only tenured faculty are included in the rotation. In all cases you work for and report to the dean.

The amount of responsibility the department head has is typically a function of how they are selected. When the dean chooses their department heads they tend to convey a lot of responsibility and seek a lot of input from them. When the faculty elects them deans tend to be less inclined to give them authority and wants to have the final say. With a rotation system it is primarily a mechanical position since the head is not going to be accountable for policy decisions.

Is this a nine or twelve month position?

It could be either. Generally the greater the level of authority or the larger the faculty in the department, the more likely it is a twelve month position. I have also seen it defined as a ten month position so the person gets a 1/9th salary increase based on the fact that the department head typically ends up needing to show up a week before the rest of the faculty and stay around a week after the rest of the faculty every term.

Even if it is a nine or ten month position, you might as well plan on teaching during the summer because there will be things that come up that you will need to deal with. Twelve month administrators don't think about the fact that you are not on the payroll when they ask for a report or plan a meeting.

Can I stop publishing?

I would not recommend that. Years ago many department heads did. However, there are multiple problems with that. First, it is easier to convince the faculty under you that they need to publish if you are maintaining at least a modest stream of publications. After all, you are getting a reduced teaching load to handle the administrative responsibilities, so claiming not enough time to research and write doesn't sell well. Second, it is tough to get it started again if you leave the position either by your choice or someone else's.

How do faculty respond to leadership efforts?

For the most part they respond much like in any other employment situation. They have more education and tend to be free thinkers, but if they buy into what the department head is selling, they will generally help make it happen.

The worst problems arise when something comes down from above that the department head doesn't particularly agree with, but has to implement. Faculty

members are very capable of seeing problems down the road and have no problem pointing them out. With tenure they also feel a degree of empowerment and aren't afraid to use it.

How you handle it is a function of your own management style and the size of the faculty that you are responsible for. The last thing you want to do is publically criticize the upper level administrators. In my case I would introduce it in a faculty meeting with that item being the only thing on the agenda and let everyone react. After everyone had their say, I would adjourn the meeting without declaring anything finalized and tell everyone that we would get back together in a couple of days.

The next day I would have the most outraged faculty coming by my office to talk about it. In that one-on-one setting, I could interact with them and their individual concerns. In some cases, I actually agreed with them, but got them to buy into the idea that we had no input, and all we could do was plan on cleaning up the mess when the higher ups figured out that it wouldn't work as proposed. After emotions had settled for a couple of days, it was a lot easier to get everyone on board even when we all knew it was a train wreck waiting to happen.

You can also get problems developing when a department covers more than one discipline. You are from one of them, and the faculty from the other one may feel you are favoring your people. At the same time the faculty in your discipline are convinced that you are working so hard to not show favoritism that you are shorting them. I always felt that if you were getting a little kickback from both groups you were probably being pretty fair.

Over the years I worked with, networked with, and mentored many department heads. Their leadership styles were highly varied, yet most kept their position as long as their faculty believed they were acting in everyone's best interest.

The only times that it just didn't work was when there was an alpha faculty member that they couldn't control. That is when backstabbing would start and faculty would get pulled into siding with the department head or the renegade. That never ends well.

This is not to say that anyone escapes those kinds of challenges. It is how you handle it as soon as it starts to develop that makes the difference. My approach was to get with the instigator one-on-one and lay my cards on the table and listen to what their issues were. Treating them as a peer worked for me, and we always managed to get to the true issue (which many times was not the obvious one) and work it out.

Setting up the teaching schedule

You generally have extensive input into teaching schedules in your department. In that process you can make a lot of friends and a lot of enemies. Every faculty member believes that they should have an ideal teaching schedule. Typically that

means one or at most two preps and a two or at most three day teaching schedule. Unless it is a very large department with a heavy load of low level, core classes, that is just not practical.

I always held that the students come first. The courses need to be offered at times and on days that allow students the best opportunity to meet degree requirements. After that you do the best you can to meet faculty desires. If you take the time to get to know the preferences of each faculty member, you will be surprised how different each faculty member is relative to those preferences.

If you work to hit the most important item for each faculty member, you will probably be able to make almost all of them reasonably happy while still keeping the student needs first. Unfortunately, there will be one or two that end up with the short straw and a real ugly schedule.

If it is the same ones every semester, you are going to generate more headaches than you want. When I was putting the schedule together and could see who was going to get one of those schedules, I would make it a point to get them in the office and lay it out to them. Occasionally they would look over the proposed schedule and see something I didn't and improve things significantly without just shifting the problem to someone else, but most of the time it ended up basically where I had it, but they knew it wasn't deliberate on my part.

I would also make it a point the next semester to make sure that they didn't get the short straw again. Since I was the one making it up, I can assure you that I taught things that I was interested in and at times that were reasonable. I personally liked teaching a night class, so I always scheduled one for myself. Not only did it free up time during the day, but I was frequently the only administrator in the building that night, and I was able to handle issues for part-time students that they couldn't deal with during the day, so it worked for everyone.

Finding time to teach

As a department head you are only a part-time administrator. You are also expected to teach and publish. In reality that is one of the bonuses of the position. We all enter the profession wanting to make a difference in the lives of our students. I have had many deans and higher administrators tell me that they miss the classroom.

The biggest challenge is to consistently have time to prep for class, grade assignments and exams in a timely fashion, and meet with students. The actual classroom time is a piece of cake. Administrative work is never evenly distributed and you are not in control of the timing.

Like any situation, rule one has to be don't procrastinate. If you do, that is when the unexpected administrative task on a short deadline arrives. Rule two is teach

something that you really enjoy. That provides some added motivation to do a good job. You also are less likely to need to do extensive prep for every class session.

To advise or not to advise

Some department heads choose not to do any advising and reserve their time for problem solving. I didn't. I always enjoyed advising, so I made a point of advising. In particular I handled all of the incoming transfer students for the department. There were significant advantages to that for me. I was going to have to sign off on how their transfer credits were being used in our degree plan anyway, so if I did the evaluation with the student, I could handle it all in one pass. This was particularly true with students with credits from schools in foreign countries. Although it was time consuming, the student got a final decision on their transfer status after one round.

Advising also gave me a lot of information about how the faculty was perceived in the classroom. It was always interesting to talk to a student that wanted to take a particular class from one faculty member but not another one. Your first thought is always that they wanted the easy one and wanted to avoid the hard one. Many times that wasn't the case. Some had prior good or bad experiences with a particular faculty member that didn't have anything to do with their grading standards. Those experiences may or may not have been in the classroom. By talking it out I learned more about the student and the faculty.

Admit your mistakes

Nobody is perfect! In spite of the fact that you have probably seen your predecessor make mistakes that you saw coming and have vowed you won't make, you will still make your share. They will either be a problem for the faculty or the dean and in a few cases for both. The best way to get it behind you and gain trust back is to admit what you did and fix it the best you can.

There is a type of "mistake" that you may find yourself making from time to time. Those are ones where you know what the rules are and you also know they don't yield the best result for the situation. I would follow the approach of it being better to beg forgiveness than ask for permission. I was fortunate enough during most of my tenure to have deans that were perceptive enough to realize what I was doing, and when they told me I had done something I shouldn't have, it was with a wink because they knew it got the best result.

The dreaded departmental meetings

Departmental meetings are a necessity, but at the same time they are inconvenient for everyone. At many schools the tradition is for the VP for academics to meet with the deans once a week. Then the deans meet with their respective department heads. This is followed by the department heads meeting with their faculty.

Most of these meetings were nothing more than the administrator providing information to the level below them. There is no discussion.

Once our faculty became comfortable with using e-mail I found that many of those department level meetings could be replaced with an e-mail conveying what the dean had told me. We only held a departmental meeting if there was going to be an agenda item that would generate a discussion. I got a lot of positive feedback from that approach, and I didn't have a problem getting people to show up. I would make it a point to layout an agenda prior to the meeting so faculty could think about the topics prior to getting together. This made the discussions a lot more productive. It didn't eliminate some very heated discussions, but it did make sure that some of the emotions had died down before we got together. Additionally I had already heard about where people were lining up so I was able to steer the discussion some and try to get people somewhat closer to agreement.

How long to keep the seat

I served for two decades, which is exceptionally long. Like other administrative positions, people tend to either move up or move on after a few years. I never had an interest in moving up to full-time administrative roles. In them you tend to spend your time raising money and holding meetings. You lose much of your contact with the typical students and only focus on the leaders that are on advisory boards. If those things interest you, work on positioning yourself for that next higher position. If not, don't hang around after the excitement of the position goes away.

Can you return to the faculty after serving as department head? If the school uses a rotation process, everyone ends up going back to full-time faculty status. Since those positions tend not to have much policy authority, it isn't a big problem. If you are appointed by the dean, you can find it pulled out from under you by a new dean that has someone else in mind. That is going to take some serious adjustment, because all of a sudden you are no longer able to control what is going on. Also, faculty still have a tendency to come to you to solve issues they are having with the new department head, and that can put you in the position of being the renegade that the new department head has to deal with. If you just burn out, it is not that hard to walk away from it and know you are not in the hot seat anymore.

Conclusion

There are many directions you can take during your career. Serving as a department head can be rewarding, but it also has its headaches. I hope this essay has helped people think about the good, the bad, and the ugly of the position.

These are strictly my observations. It would be interesting to run a survey of department heads and get a better handle on how schools select department heads and how others see their role. I am retired, so it is an open question for others to pursue.

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