

From the Chair's Perspective

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In preparing to respond to this question, I revisited (in some cases, visited for the first time) published research, analysis, and opinion pieces on the role of department chairs. I also reflected on my own experience serving as department chair in communication-focused departments at two different universities. Between the two positions, I have spent the last twenty-plus years as a department chair in the communication discipline.

While a review of literature is beyond the scope of these comments, there are an increasing number of sources of observation, opinion, and empirical research on the challenges and opportunities facing department chairs. One of the better ones, despite being several years old, is by Hecht, Higgerson, Gmelch and Tucker.¹ In their chapter on the roles and responsibilities of department chairs, they point out the paradoxical nature of the roles, "Department chairs are both managers and faculty colleagues, advisors and advisees, soldiers and captains, drudges and bosses."

Although the focus here is on the role on communication units, it is important to note both the similarity of roles across different academic disciplines, as well as the range of responsibilities that may vary from one communication department to another.

Roles

Whether in a department of history, accounting, biology or communication, all department chairs likely have responsibility for advocating on behalf of their respective departments to higher administration; managing departmental budgets; carrying out directives of higher administration; evaluating faculty members and departmental staff; developing/managing class schedules; assigning advisees (while serving as the advisor of first and, sometimes, last resort for students); handling equipment and classroom issues; and representing the department to both internal and external publics. Assessment, love it or hate it, has become an increasingly important issue in higher education and department chairs are typically tasked with overseeing the development, justification, and implementation of assessment procedures on the department level.

Factors Influencing the Departmental Chair's Role

While a great deal of similarity exists, there may also be roles and responsibilities that vary from one department to another. While some of this variation may be associated with what we like to think of as the unique nature of communication-related departments, I suspect as much or more variation is attributable to other factors. For example, the organizational structure, culture, and traditions of the university, college, and department will have a major influence on the role of the department administrator. Is the chair selected from strictly internal department faculty or through an external search? Is the administrator selected by faculty members and approved by the dean, appointed by the dean with advice and consent of the faculty, or even appointed by the administration without consent of the faculty. Is the department relatively homogenous in training and focus, or does a great deal of intellectual diversity exist in such things as theoretical and/or methodological orientation, pedagogical approaches or differing values placed on teaching, research or service.

At many universities, chairs are increasingly expected to be involved in fundraising. In programs associated with student media or other points of direct contact with the public, chairs may

¹ Hecht, I. W. D, Higgerson, M. L., Gmelch, W. H., Tucker, A. (1999). Roles and responsibilities of department chairs in *The department chair as academic leader*. Retrieved from: http://www2.acenet.edu/resources/chairs/docs/hecht_external_audiences.pdf

need to have significant involvement in freedom of expression issues on behalf of students and faculty. In my current department, for example, faculty members serve as advisors to the student run radio station, print and online newspaper, television, and yearbook. In addition, the Theatre and Dance program is part of the department and presents multiple productions and concerts each year.

Regardless of the nature of the department, the central role of the communication administrator must remain the same. His or her basic job is to make sure other people can do theirs. The communication administrator is an *enabler*. An effective chair is one who recognizes this as the fundamental responsibility of the position.

Many responsibilities of the position relate to enabling student learning and progress toward their degrees. Other tasks facilitate departmental colleagues' teaching, research, and/or service endeavors. Finally, some responsibilities of the chair aid in the accomplishment of departmental goals or those of the larger institution.

This does not mean, of course, that a department chair must be a completely selfless individual living only through the success of others, but it does imply that one who cannot find some degree of individual satisfaction in the facilitation of the success of others is likely to be an ineffective (and very frustrated) department chair.

Essential Skills

Multiple communication skills are necessary to meet the primary responsibility of the position. The most obvious is *advocacy*. The communication administrator must effectively and persuasively advocate within the department and on behalf of the department and faculty to the larger institution and various external publics.

While obviously important, advocacy may not be the most frequent activity of the department chair. The most common and important responsibilities are those that can be broadly categorized as having *relational communication* outcomes: building, facilitating and maintaining relationships within and outside the department. *Conflict management* and *consensus building* come readily to mind. Interpersonal scholars generally agree that conflict is a natural aspect of relationships, and the relationships within communication programs are certainly no exception. A former chair was fond of saying that if the department had to take a vote on an issue; we (and he) had failed. While most departments cannot avoid taking votes on at least some issues, the point is a good one. Building consensus on issues within a department is one of the more important aspects of the chair role.

Summary

Thus, from a department chair's perspective, the essential leadership role of today's communication administrator is to facilitate the success of the members of the department, the students it serves, and the larger institution of which it is part. The primary way in which this is accomplished is through effective communication strategies.