Communication Department Heads: An Analysis of Positions Available 1990 through 1994

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"Leadership is one of the most observed and least understood phenomena on earth."

James MacGregor Burns

BURNS' assessment of leadership seems to hold true regardless of context. One particular context where it certainly applies is that of the communication department. Chairpersons, directors, and department heads of all types have attracted the attention of scholars interested in the status of the discipline, yet those positions still remain illusive. Scholars have, indeed, exerted great effort at the process of examining communication department heads. Gillespie (1985) has, for example, examined legal issues confronting the heads of departmental units. The heads of prolific departmental units have been examined (Hickson, 1990). The place of the department head in regard to instructional practice has been investigated (Anderson, 1989). And, the department head as a force for change has garnered significant attention (McGlone, 1987; Sisco, 1987; Welch, 1987).

Despite the wealth of scholarly attention lavished upon the position of department head, little solid data exists regarding the qualifications and responsibilities of that position. There has, however, been some valuable speculation and observation made in regard to the role of the department head. Pappas (1990) offered several observations regarding the contemporary responsibilities of the department head. The role of the department head in regard to faculty development has received attention (Lester, 1987). A bibliography concerned with the overall role of the department head has been constructed (Dressel, 1973). And, considerable attention has been focused on the leadership role and power of the department head (Dedman, 1985; Goyer, 1985; Jeffrey, 1985; Taylor, 1985). The contemporary role of the department head has become increasingly complex and complicated. Tucker (1992) has identified 54 different types of duties that department heads must be prepared to encounter. More recently, it was reported that a team of deans and department heads at the University of Nebraska cataloged 97 specific activities that department heads perform (Diamond, 1996). As great as these demands on department heads are, they are likely to increase in the future. Diamond (1996) noted: The chairmen and chairwomen of the next decade must have more skills, administrative and personal, than their counterparts required in past

decades (B2). The works that have offered some perspective on the role of the department head have provided valuable information and generated considerable discussion. There are, however, some important concerns and questions that have yet to be addressed. What specific qualifications do departmental units require of individuals who might serve as department head? And, what responsibilities do those departmental units consider most important? The present study is designed to help answer such questions to provide valuable information for individuals who might one day wish to serve as a department head. Further, departmental units may gain insight into the requirements, characteristics, and other items commonly featured in candidate searches for department heads.

METHOD

Research examining the administrative responsibilities of directors of forensics (Shelton, 1986) employed position listings posted in the classified section of *Spectra*. That investigation provided robust data regarding degree requirements, rank of appointment, and other features associated with forensic positions. The present study will employ the same database. *Spectra* is a publication of the Speech Communication Association published monthly, except July, and is mailed to all association members (*Spectra*, 1991). A classified ad section, appearing in each monthly issue, contains postings of positions available in the communication discipline. The postings for department head positions are examined in the present study. All position listings from the period January 1990 through December 1994 were included. Each listing was included only once, although some listings appeared in multiple monthly issues. The listings were examined for information regarding qualifications and responsibilities associated with the positions. Results were tabulated and appropriate computations of percentage data were made.

RESULTS

Seventy-one listings for department heads appeared in the 55 issues of Spectra examined in the present study. Of those, 54 of the listings (76.06%) indicated that the doctorate or another terminal degree would be required for appointment to the position of department head. Forty-one (57.75%) of the listings indicated a preference for administrative experience on the part of candidates for department head. Another 49 (67.01%) listings indicated that prior teaching experience would be required of candidates. Fifty (70.42%) of the listings indicated that candidates should possess a record of scholarship and/or publication. A total of 53 (74.65%) of the listings indicated a level of rank for appointment of candidates to department head positions. Eight (15.09%) of the listings indicated that appointment would be to an unspecified "senior" rank. Another 15 (28.30%) of the listings indicated that the rank of full professor would be made. Yet another 27 (50.94%) listings indicated that appointment would be at the rank of associate professor. Only 3 (5.66%) of the listings specified appointment at the rank of assistant professor. A wide variety of other qualifications and responsibilities were indicated in the listings for department heads. These included the need to develop graduate courses, to schedule undergraduate courses, and to assist with forensics. One feature mentioned with some frequency was a need for the ability to develop external funding on the part of candidates for department head positions. Nine (12.68%) of the listings explicitly indicated a request for such ability. The most frequently indicated demand upon candidates that was featured in listings for department head positions was a need for "leadership" experience or ability. A total of 45 (63.38%) of the listings indicated such a leadership requirement.

The requests for leadership requirements varied considerably, although many of them can be divided into three categories as indicated in Table 1. A number of listings specified

an interest in candidates who could demonstrate general leadership abilities, such as a request for "demonstrated leadership skills." Many other references fall under the rubric of "academic learning," such as asking candidates to be "capable of providing leadership in teaching and research." A collection of transactional roles, such as candidates "chosen must be capable of providing strong, effective leadership and fostering a collegial atmosphere," provides another category for many leadership requests.

TABLE 1

Department Head Leadership Qualifications

General Leadership
> "Demonstrated leadership skills required"
> "Clear evidence of skill and commitment to administrative service and leadership"
> "Experience in administrative leadership"
> "The candidate must have a record of leadership"
> "Record of excellence in leadership"
> "Provide leadership and vision to the department"
> "Ability to lead rapidly growing program"
> "Demonstrate leadership in guiding the department during the 1990s"
> "Customary leadership and administrative experience"

Academic Leadership
> "Administrative leadership for the undergraduate and graduate degree program"
> "The chairperson will provide effective leadership in teaching, scholarly, and management activities"
> "Responsible for providing academic leadership"
> "Be able to provide leadership in enhancing teaching and research"
> "The chairperson is expected to provide academic vision and intellectual leadership"
> "Be capable of strong academic leadership"

Transactional Leadership
> "The Department Head provides leadership for a large and complex department"
> "The individual chosen must be capable of providing strong, effective leadership and fostering a collegial atmosphere"
> "Demonstrate effective interpersonal skills, appropriate for a position of administrative leadership in a diverse department"
> "Seeking a dynamic leader"

DISCUSSION

It is not surprising that over 75% of the listings for department heads indicated that the doctorate or other terminal degree would be required. The doctorate has become a standard feature associated with positions in higher education, and most certainly for senior-level positions. Nearly 95% (94.34%) of the listings indicated that candidates would be appointed at the rank of associate professor or higher. Such positions require candidates to meet all of the standard qualifications for a tenured appointment, including possession of the doctorate. As an important administrative position, it is also not surprising that over half (57.75%) of the listings requested that candidates possess previous administrative experience. This clearly suggests that departmental units often seek candidates for their chief administrative officer who have demonstrated that they have the necessary skills and background to serve in such a role.

The data regarding teaching experience are also informative. Nearly 70% (69.01%) of the listings indicated that candidates for department head should have demonstrated teaching experience. This suggests that departmental units are not only seeking seasoned administrators, but well qualified instructors as well. This may indicate some level of commitment to instruction held by most departmental units. Just over 70% (70.42%) of the listings indicated that a record of scholarship and/or publication would be required of candidates for department head. This clearly punctuates the importance of scholarly activity for individuals engaged in higher education. Further, this also underscores the heavy demands placed upon department heads. Bostrom (1984) has suggested that an inverse relationship exist between the productivity of department heads and the level of "burnout."

The data from the present study suggests that the risk of such an outcome still exists. The data regarding other qualifications and responsibilities associated with department head positions suggest even more about the heavy demands placed upon individuals who would serve in these positions. The various responsibilities include such things as assisting with forensics. Bartanen (1994) has noted, for instance, that forensics directors are almost overwhelmed by the responsibilities associated with that position. To compound the responsibilities of a department head by requiring assistance with forensics, would mean that demands upon some administrative positions are immense. The desire of many departmental units to seek out candidates who can generate external funding says much about the current status of funding for higher education.

In a period of belt tightening and budget restraint, it is not surprising that departmental units would be interested in individuals who can seek out alternative funding sources. These data also speak to the new demands placed upon many department heads. Some critical observers (Tucker, 1992; Diamond, 1996) have noted that many non-traditional duties of this nature will confront those individuals serving as department heads in the next several decades. The listings for department heads clearly indicate that the ability to lead is essential. Over 60% (63.38%) of the listings had some leadership demand. As reflected in Table I, many of these demands are rather broad and vague. A promising area for future research would be to conduct an investigation of departmental units that have placed listings and to clarify and amplify the details associated with these demands for leadership. Such an investigation would potentially provide more robust data that might inform both individuals seeking positions as department heads and departmental units that must seek out those candidates. The present study and future investigations that follow a similar path may go a long way toward improving the quality of the department head position. Indeed, Diamond (1996) has argued that changes in the method of recruiting department heads is crucial. He notes that those responsible for choosing them must do a better job of describing the position and matching the candidates to the demands of the job. The responsibilities of the department head should be carefully thought out and clearly articulated during the search process. As many of us already know, being a great researcher or a good colleague does not necessarily mean that someone will make a strong department head (p. B2).

Data found here and in future investigations may help forge stronger connections between the duties that departmental units seek to have covered and the candidates they seek to meet such needs. Another area for future research would include the investigation of listings for other administrative positions. Shelton (1986) conducted one investigation of directors of forensics, and similar investigations of basic course directors, deans, and other administrative positions could potentially generate data that would be helpful to individuals in career preparation and to departmental units conducting plans for candidate searches. One shortcoming of the present study may be its failure to incorporate other sources for department head listings. Both *The Chronicle of Higher Education* and the *ICA Newsletter* offer sections for the posting of academic positions, including those for department heads. A random check of *The Chronicle of Higher Education* suggests that few department head

positions are listed in that source that do not also appear in *Spectra*. Further, the *ICA News-letter* only appears on a quarterly basis, limiting the opportunity for additional listings. In addition, Shelton (1986) has argued that *Spectra* is "the most universal source for those seeking positions offered by Speech Communication departments" (p. 124).

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