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## Chairs as Rhetorical Agents: Mentoring for Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion

LETIZIA GUGLIELMO

A growing body of work continues to demonstrate the extent to which faculty of color and other marginalized faculty face bias and confront microaggressions in overt and less visible ways across their faculty roles at various stages of their academic careers. In their 2015 volume *The Department Chair as Transformative Diversity Leader*, Edna Chun and Alvin Evans explain, “The role of the academic department chair in creating diverse and inclusive learning environments is arguably the most pivotal position in higher education today,” and as other scholars have explored, department chairs are well positioned to “perpetuate” or “disrupt” inequities and bias (Beddoes and Schimpf 2018).

Engaging with this body of work, this article positions department chairs not solely as *responding to* instances of bias and racism but as *advocating for* faculty. Identifying chairs as active rhetorical agents in supporting diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI), my purpose is to help them do the following:

- Recognize mentoring and sponsorship roles as essential duties of the department chair in advancing DEI.
- Identify three practical strategies for intervention and advocacy in the most critical and visible processes for individual faculty career stages.
- Articulate how these strategies can be implemented immediately and efficiently, building on larger departmental or institutional initiatives advancing DEI.

I want to reinforce that these strategies engage with a substantial body of scholarship that already exists with a focus on systemic racism in

higher education. My focus, therefore, is not on debating systemic racism in higher education or on individual acts of racism or discrimination but on how chairs can serve as rhetorical agents in the face of the systemic racism, exclusion, and discrimination that contributes to the well-documented experiences of minoritized and underrepresented faculty.

The chair's role in DEI at the institutional level is well documented in the research focused primarily on program and curriculum development and revision; student learning, mentoring, and success; and faculty hiring. In terms of faculty hiring and support, however, *retention* of underrepresented and minoritized faculty often receives less attention. The belief that effective onboarding and mentoring will lead to increased retention often perpetuates narratives of individual choice and meritocracy that ignore the microaggressions minoritized faculty face inside and outside the classroom and the bias that can shape the visibility and evaluation of their work.

Although current research describes the chair's role in DEI and in mentoring faculty, these resources do not always provide concrete strategies connected to the work that chairs are already doing. I propose that we think of chairs as rhetorical agents, positioned not only as *responding to* microaggressions or bias but also as proactively *advocating for* faculty and their work through writing and speech and through the multiple audiences that those rhetorical acts will engage.

One of the most visible processes in chair work that can facilitate this rhetorical agency is the faculty review process, both annual reviews

and reviews for promotion and tenure. In this article, I explore the chair's roles as faculty mentors, sponsors, and advocates enacted through three specific strategies:

- Framing teaching evaluations within the context of the scholarly literature
- Highlighting narratives of teaching, research, and service that advance DEI and align with institutional initiatives
- Engaging in active sponsorship of minoritized faculty and their work

Notably, it's essential for these rhetorical acts to move beyond the kind of advice-giving that is often associated with mentoring. Documenting these rhetorical acts in writing reinforces the significance of DEI work broadly and helps to demonstrate alignment of faculty work with institutional initiatives.

### Framing Teaching Evaluations

Current scholarship on student evaluations of teaching (SETs) reveals several key findings on the role that these instruments play in faculty evaluation and review. Qualitative studies of classroom experiences and other personal narratives of faculty work further illuminate the lived experiences of minoritized faculty (Chun and Evans 2015). Studies and other reviews of literature on SETs indicate that these instruments may disadvantage underrepresented or nonmajority faculty given findings that "faculty of color received lower course evaluations than their white peers" (Huston 2006, 598), disparities that exist when accounting for differences in course and topic. In some male-dominated fields, women faculty may receive lower course evaluations.

Current scholarship also reveals the extent to which women of color are frequently challenged and dismissed and their expertise questioned in classroom settings, teaching conditions that also shape student learning conditions. Notably, course content that challenges students' worldviews or accepted truths or that pushes them out of their comfort zones in ways that lead them to confront their privilege can also shape classroom interactions and students' evaluations of teaching. Huston (2006, 602) explains, "Because faculty course evaluations are often used in making decisions for promotion and tenure, they are a relatively hidden source of bias

against faculty of color, one that administrators, department chairs, and hiring or promotion committees are not likely to consider."

Other resources on this topic may exist within professional disciplinary organizations to guide chairs' engagement with SETs. In late 2019, for example, joint statements from a group of professional organizations, including the American Sociological Association, American Political Science Association, and Rhetoric Society of America, among others, addressed student teaching evaluations, student learning, and DEI.

**Strategy 1: Frame teaching evaluations within the context of the scholarly literature and engage multiple measures of teaching effectiveness.** As part of your evaluations of faculty teaching, how might you draw evidence from multiple sources to

One of the most visible processes in chair work that can facilitate this rhetorical agency is the faculty review process.

create a more robust and holistic assessment that moves beyond SETs alone? These sources might include the following:

- Awards and recognition of teaching
- Descriptions of innovative teaching practices
  - Student mentoring and supervision, especially of students from underrepresented groups
  - Students' narrative comments, especially those that align with the instructor's teaching philosophy, pedagogical goals, and course outcomes
  - Course observations or peer evaluations of teaching initiated by the faculty member
  - Engagement in the scholarship of teaching and learning, including publications and presentations

To facilitate this process, ensure that faculty are aware of these multiple measures of

teaching effectiveness before reviews begin so that they can contribute to the framing of their work. Again, because acts of rhetorical agency shape how audiences receive information, capturing this framing in writing as part of your review is essential. In this way, you are advocating for faculty in how you shape reception of their work at the next level of review and in future reviews and you offer mentoring by providing framing that faculty may then blend into future work.

### Getting Started

- What are two action steps that you will take to prepare for framing teaching evaluations within the context of the scholarly literature?
  - What additional measures of teaching effectiveness will you deliberately engage to provide more holistic evaluations of faculty work?

### DEI and Institutional Initiatives

In addition to findings on student evaluations of teaching and student-faculty interactions, scholarship also reveals the ways that minoritized faculty face microaggressions and bias in the evaluation of their work across teaching, research, and service. These findings are especially significant in light of the heavier service loads that BIPOC faculty carry in developing and coordinating programs, serving as formal and informal mentors to students and faculty, and being called on to lead or to make significant contributions to DEI and antiracism initiatives at the departmental and/or institutional level that require significant intellectual and emotional labor and often shape research agendas.

Regarding evaluation of faculty scholarship and intellectual work, for example, Diab and colleagues (2019, 464) write, "Given the pervasiveness of microaggressions in everyday life, it is no surprise that they similarly shape writing activities, especially complicating one's rights to speak, write, conduct research, and share expertise ... When microinvalidations undermine people as knowers, they also undermine full personhood, which includes having one's experiences acknowledged by others, being able to construct new knowledge, and being able to contribute as a knowledgeable agent within one's community."

### Strategy 2: Highlight narratives that advance DEI and align with institutional initiatives.

As you approach reviews and frame faculty work for multiple audiences, consider the following:

- Highlight connections between faculty teaching and mentoring and retention of minoritized students, especially with connections to institutional strategic plans and initiatives.

- Highlight connections among faculty teaching, other service activities, and DEI initiatives grounded in student success, including connections to faculty research where applicable.

- Amplify the significance of faculty research and publication venues that expand the reach and circulation of ideas, including community-engaged work, and the significant ways that faculty may contribute to public discussions, especially those connected to DEI.

- Highlight connections and contributions to other institutional initiatives (e.g., high-impact practices; retention, progression, and graduation).

- Make rhetorical choices in framing responses to and evaluations of annual review materials and promotion and tenure materials with attention to quality and significance of student mentoring and supervision; reach and circulation of scholarship and creative activity; deliberate integration of teaching, scholarship, and service to support DEI; and interdisciplinary inquiry at the heart of faculty teaching and research.

Again, because acts of rhetorical agency shape how audiences receive information, capturing this framing in writing as part of your review is essential. In this way, you are advocating for faculty in how you shape reception of their work at the next level of review and in future reviews and you offer mentoring by providing framing that faculty may then blend into future work.

#### Getting Started

- What current campus or departmental DEI initiatives can you keep in mind as you prepare for faculty review and evaluation?

- What other institutional initiatives and strategic goals should you foreground while engaging in this work?

- How else might you highlight or make visible faculty teaching, research, and service activities in the review process?

### Mentors and Sponsors

One final strategy that I want to share from the research is the distinction between *mentors* and *sponsors* or *faculty mentoring* and *faculty sponsorship*.

Rena Seltzer identifies sponsorship as being particularly gendered in terms of career progression. She indicates that although women are mentored extensively within the corporate world, men often receive more promotions because they are actively sponsored. According to Seltzer (2015, 95), “A mentor might give you advice on how to move into a service role in your professional society, but a sponsor would suggest your name to a society’s leaders as a good candidate to serve on or lead a committee, nominate your work for a prize, or otherwise champion your career.”

**Strategy 3: Engage in active sponsorship of minoritized faculty and their work.** Both mentoring and sponsorship are important for faculty success, but underrepresented faculty often do not receive the kind of sponsorship that will support their advancement or increase diversity or representation in key leadership positions. Given what scholarship reveals regarding microaggressions and bias and the ways they may shape evaluation and recognition of faculty work, active sponsorship is another strategy for rhetorical agency as a department chair mentoring for DEI.

This sponsorship might include the following:

- Nominating a colleague for an award
- Mentioning a colleague and providing a developed description of their work in a public space or meeting, highlighting connections to strategic initiatives or programs
- Sponsoring a colleague with attention to high-profile opportunities and remaining mindful of and being willing to mitigate their workload in order to support that work

Active and meaningful sponsorship requires becoming familiar with colleagues’ work and their areas of expertise. And it can be one strategy to address what Chun and Evans (2015, 99) describe as “opportunity

hoarding,” the predictable process that the same colleagues will be nominated for awards or recommended for leadership positions by virtue of race and gender. Essential to this work is a strategic and deliberate willingness to acknowledge and adjust workloads to avoid perpetuating the “privilege payoff” (Reddick 2021).

#### Getting Started

- What are your next steps for engaging in active sponsorship?

- What information or additional resources might you need to be an active sponsor for minoritized or underrepresented faculty in your department or program?

- What will your sponsorship look like?

### Conclusion

Although many institutions have begun and are engaged in ongoing initiatives focused on DEI, these task forces often lead to reports and conversations that fall short of sustained and meaningful change and that may be delayed or tabled with turnover in leadership. Rather than waiting for specific directives from upper administrators, department chairs are well positioned to initiate change from their current roles as mentors, sponsors, and advocates. ▲

**Letizia Guglielmo** is professor of English and interdisciplinary studies and a faculty success fellow at Kennesaw State University. Email: lgugliel@kennesaw.edu

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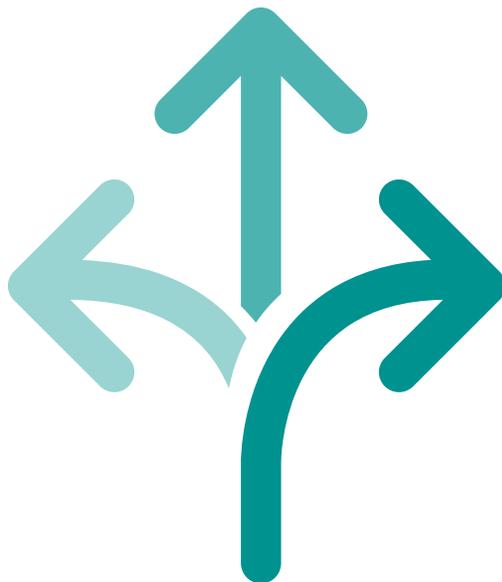


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## Agile Academic Leadership

Revitalizing Community &  
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# On Black Widows in Academe: Cultivating Healthy Academic Departments

CRYSTAL R. CHAMBERS

Academia has not escaped the Great Resignation. Although data on pandemic-era faculty employment trends are emergent, the AAUP reports that there were declines in the number of full-time faculty positions in about half of US institutions (AAUP 2021). To what extent these declines are associated with general shifts from full-time to contingent employment or faculty choices such as early retirement are unclear. However, as observed by McClure and Fryar (2022), a minority of faculty seem to be leaving academia while those who stay “are increasingly pulling away”: faculty “are withdrawing from certain aspects of the job or, on a more emotional level, from the institution itself ... they are waving goodbye to norms and systems that prevailed in the past.”

While some faculty reaction is attributable to institutional responses to the pandemic, salary concerns, and legislative intrusion, disengagement can also stem from longstanding cultural rifts. Many of these challenges are beyond the domain of department chairs. Yet there are opportunities for chairs to make meaningful change for faculty.

A phenomenon I recognized earlier in my career is what I have dubbed the black widow approach to faculty acculturation. In the black widow acculturation scenario, a stretched and stressed largely tenured department hires a new tenure-track faculty member. Academic service work like assessment, accreditation, program coordination, or department special projects that prior to this hire were the responsibility of a select one or a few tenured faculty are then unevenly “shared” with the new faculty member. The new colleague has the same teaching loads and scholarship expectations to achieve tenure, the additional service

burden notwithstanding. Upon a review for reappointment and/or tenure, the tenure committee assesses that the faculty member has not met department standards and is dismissed from the institution.

This pattern is parallel to phenomena observed among a set of arachnids subsumed under the common name of black widow. In North America, we have three species of black widows: *Latrodectus hesperus* in the west, *Latrodectus variolus* in the north, and *Latrodectus mactans* in the south. There are,

There are opportunities for chairs to make meaningful change for faculty.

however, more than thirty species globally. Black widows are known for their venom, which can be deadly to young and elderly humans. They are also known for being cannibalistic. Yet, contrary to popular beliefs, female black widows are not as likely to consume their male partners or spiderlings if they are well fed. Absent ample resources, however, they may eat their mates or offspring. Similarly, spiderlings are more likely to eat each other when some are larger than others and food is scarce. For this reason, female black widows try to ensure equal development among their eggs (Machemer 2021): “The last thing a mother wants is, out of her 300 babies, to have one giant one and 299 dead ones” (Jonathan Pruitt, University of California at Santa Barbara, quoted in Machemer 2021).

Perhaps like black widows, we in academe make suboptimal decisions under resource constraints. While we can advocate for more resources, we often have limited control over allocations from central administration to our colleges and schools and down to our departments. We do, however, have control over how we allocate resources within our departments. Here are four lessons we can learn from black widows to prevent cannibalization within a department.

**1. Equity matters.** Female black widows are careful to feed all their spiderlings. They allocate food resources equitably to promote even development, just as a good department chair should. Equity here should not be interpreted as equally. As observed by Martha Minnow (1990), treating differentially situated people the same is treating them inequitably, as they are not being resourced in accordance with their needs. For a guide to think through how to assist faculty in consideration of their individual knowledge, skills, connections, and experiences while supporting individual agency, see *The Leader’s Window* by Beck and Yeager (2016).

**2. Don’t overfeed fat spiderlings.** The reason that female black widows attend to equitable spiderling development is that larger spiderlings will eat their siblings. In the context of departments, this means making sure that workloads are fair. Years ago, a colleague shared that her department chair asked her to assume additional teaching responsibilities in order to enable another colleague, a man, to pursue a research project. She requested similar consideration the following year and was told that her teaching was too valuable to students and the department. But what about her opportunities to develop as a scholar?

Departments tend to augment women’s teaching, advising, and service contributions (O’Meara et al. 2021) while men are more likely to shirk service responsibilities (Pyke 2015), particularly in STEM fields (Ruder et al. 2018). Inequitable workloads contribute to unequal faculty development opportunities that in turn can be used against faculty whose teaching and service

contributions outweigh their scholarship. The scholarly productivity of faculty who receive greater scholarly support can also become the standard bearers for faculty success within a unit, the benchmark against which all others are evaluated to the detriment of faculty with heavier teaching and service loads. Teaching and service underloading can further contribute to a sense of entitlement among faculty privileged in scholarly support. Those faculty may not only come to expect reduced teaching and service contributions but also rise to formal and informal leadership positions within the department, where they evaluate the performance of other faculty through a lens of privilege.

Therefore, it is important to holistically evaluate faculty performance, rewarding faculty for distinctive teaching and service responsibilities in addition to those who distinguish themselves through scholarship. Moreover, tools like those in the Faculty Workload and Rewards Project (O'Meara et al. 2021) can help chairs distribute faculty work equitably as well as provide transparency regarding work distribution for the entire department.

### 3. Mature spiders need support too.

Female black widow spiders are less likely to consume male partners and spiderlings if they are otherwise well fed. Contemporary faculty mental health and exhaustion concerns are well documented. McClure and Fryar's (2022) observations regarding contemporary faculty disengagement speak to the support needs of mid- to late-career faculty. Department chairs can support midcareer faculty professional development through opportunities such as the National Center for Faculty Diversity and Development's Post-Tenure Pathfinders Program. In addition, writing retreats and team-building work integrated into department meetings can give faculty a space to voice their concerns and build community.

**4. Promote healthy work environments.** Male black widow spiders can sense female hunger through pheromones and will avoid mating with a hungry female black widow to

prevent becoming her snack. Similarly, workplace toxicity inhibits productivity. As such, department chairs should actively address workplace toxicity, including but not limited to interpersonal racial, gender, sexual orientation, and ableist discrimination. Toxic environments reduce faculty productivity and encourage turnover (O'Meara et al. 2021). Resources such as the field of nursing's healthy work environment standards (Harmon et al. 2018) can help department chairs foster a healthy work environment for all. ▲

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**Crystal R. Chambers** is a professor in the Department of Educational Leadership at East Carolina University. Email: chambersc@ecu.edu

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## Toxic Loneliness and the Academic Department

ROBERT E. CIPRIANO AND JEFFREY L. BULLER

The sudden pivot from in-person to remote meetings that began in early 2020 with the spread of COVID-19 created numerous challenges, particularly for professors and chairs whose social lives were built largely on interactions with their colleagues. In higher education, the line distinguishing a coworker from a friend is often quite thin, even nonexistent. When working from home began to feel more like living (isolated) at work, problems began to arise that affected both the quality of people's work and their general satisfaction with life.

For all too many people, returning to campus once the pandemic began to subside

didn't solve the problem. On April 8, 2022, the *New York Times* reported, "As more workers return to their offices, many are bringing deep emotional and mental scars from the pandemic to their cubicles—and at a time when the world feels particularly unstable" (Wolfe and Wartik 2022). Higher education was not immune from these difficulties. Colleges and universities often employ a large percentage of introverts who are attracted to careers where it is possible for them to work in isolation and where abundant opportunities for shop talk can reduce the need to engage in the type of small talk that they find aggravating. When in-person

classes started up again, many introverts questioned the need to return to face-to-face meetings and social gatherings (or even any meetings or social gatherings at all), saying, “We were getting along *fine* when we were all conducting departmental business remotely. Why do we have to go back to the way things were before? It’s not as though everything was perfect then, was it?”

### The Effects of Toxic Loneliness

The problem is that although many people in higher education were relieved by the reduction in the number of meetings and social gatherings that occurred during the pandemic, some of their colleagues *needed* those meetings. In their absence, they began to feel the phenomenon known as toxic loneliness.

Toxic loneliness has been widely observed in prisoners who are subject to long stretches in solitary confinement. A summary of those studies by Stuart Grassian in 1983 concluded that deprived of regular interaction with others, certain prisoners experienced extreme restlessness alternating with extreme lassitude, confusion, irritability sometimes leading to bursts of anger, and increased confusion. But the effects of loneliness can occur in environments far less extreme than solitary confinement. In 2020, Dr. Vivek Murthy, the nineteenth surgeon general of the United States, declared that loneliness should be considered a public health concern, calling it “a root cause and contributor to many of the epidemics sweeping the world today—from alcohol and drug addiction to violence to depression and anxiety” (xix). In addition, a 2018 report by the Kaiser Family Foundation found that 22 percent of all adults in the United States (more than fifty-five million people) described themselves as lonely or socially isolated (DiJulio et al. 2018).

In their response to COVID-19, many governments urged their citizens to engage in what they called social distancing. What they were really requesting (and sometimes requiring) was physical distancing, the maintenance of six or more feet between individuals to reduce the likelihood of disease transmission. One can be physically distanced without being socially distanced

by maintaining contacts with others via the telephone, email, videoconferences, and the like. But some members of the higher education community are returning to campus only to find themselves still *socially* distanced from others who got used to working more independently and continue to engage in *acting remote* even when they’re no longer *physically remote*. It can feel to some people that they’re still very lonely even though they’re now surrounded once again by many people.

### What Can Chairs Do?

Chairs are uniquely positioned to help department members who may be suffering from toxic loneliness. The first thing they need to do is to be aware of the signs: people who used to find it easy to connect with others (who may even have been regarded as the

Chairs are uniquely positioned to help department members who may be suffering from toxic loneliness.

life of the party) are now finding meaningful relations with colleagues much more difficult; signs of depression in people who were regularly in a good mood before the pandemic; expressions of self-doubt in outgoing people who used to demonstrate a high level of confidence; increased irritability, perhaps even resulting in angry outbursts that seem atypical of the person; and a tendency to fault others as aloof or unfriendly.

The second thing chairs need to realize is that although a supportive conversation with the person may help, toxic loneliness isn’t the sort of problem they can resolve themselves. As we just stated, deep-seated loneliness can be indistinguishable from depression and may even lead into it. A gentle suggestion that a session with a professional counselor may be in order or a reminder of the services available through the institution’s Employee

Assistance Program may be the best way for most chairs to address the issue.

A third strategy would be to have a discreet conversation with introverts in the department. Since the appearance of Susan Cain’s book *Quiet: The Power of Introverts in a World That Can’t Stop Talking* (2012), introverts have felt empowered to tell extroverts, “Here’s what I need from you ...” Extroverts are far less used to telling introverts what they need in return. Chairs can perform a valuable service, therefore, by helping introverts see how actions that are perfectly normal for them may be hurting other department members. As a team, people in the unit should be aware of others’ needs, extroverts making sure that their need for meetings and social events doesn’t unnecessarily exhaust introverts, and introverts making sure that their need for solitary reflection doesn’t make extroverts feel isolated.

### Advice for Chairs Experiencing Toxic Loneliness

It is possible, of course, that the people who are most in need of help due to toxic loneliness aren’t the faculty members but the chairs themselves. Although introverts are common at all levels of higher education, the percentage of extroverts increases as one moves up the administrative ranks. Academic leadership responsibilities commonly involve attendance at numerous meetings, and the expectation that one will meet with donors and participate in social events rises. For this reason, extroverts sometimes self-select in seeking leadership positions and at other times are chosen for these positions because they demonstrate superior social skills throughout the interview process. As a result, even if faculty members may have adjusted well to the greater isolation brought about by the pandemic, chairs and deans may be facing larger challenges.

If you’re a chair who recognizes the symptoms of toxic loneliness in your own behavior, what can you do? The following are a few strategies to consider:

**Make a list of the social connections you *do* have.** Extroverts sometimes become so fixated on the people with whom they’re not able to connect that they forget the

resources that remain available to them. The people who you regard as your “work friends” may appear to have pulled away following the pandemic, but there are certainly others in your life who care about you and want to connect. Creating a list of these people can make you feel better in and of itself (“Just look at all the people I can reach out to whenever I want!”), and it can serve as your “emergency contact list” when you really need or want to talk to someone.

#### **Inundate the world with compliments.**

People may seem to have little time for chitchat, but everyone loves a sincere compliment. If your colleagues seem more reluctant to engage in conversation these days, reestablish connections with them by praising an article they’ve written or mentioning a positive remark about them you’ve heard from a student. These short interactions won’t change your work environment immediately, but you’ll notice a gradual thaw over time. Even the greatest introverts in your department will be glad to engage in conversations with you because you always make them feel good.

**Do a self-check.** Examine the situations in which you tend to feel the loneliest. Are there certain stimuli (such as seeing everyone in a hurry to leave at the end of the day) or circumstances (such as the fact that your office is in a remote location) that prompt your feelings? Simply being aware of what tends to exacerbate your loneliness can help you resist the most negative feelings you may have. You’ll find yourself thinking, “Oh, that’s right: I always feel worse at this time of day” rather than simply giving in to your feelings. You can *examine* your emotions rather than *yielding* to them. Remember, too, that there’s a big difference between being alone and being lonely. Once you begin to recognize the conditions that prompt your negative feelings of loneliness, you can become more proactive in dealing with them.

**Appreciate the paradox.** As we saw earlier, loneliness is quite common. In fact, one Harvard study found that more than a third of the population of the United States has experienced what the authors characterized as “serious loneliness” during

the global pandemic, and that figure rises dramatically for young Americans and women with small children (Weissbourd et al. 2021). Although you may *feel* alone, you’re really part of *a large group of lonely people*. As strange as it may seem, there can actually be some comfort in appreciating the paradox that you’re not alone in your loneliness.

**Reach out to others from beyond your department.** In all probability, the new normal will start to feel a lot more like the old normal—with an abundance of in-person meetings and social events—within a year or two. But how can you meet others who share your interests while you’re waiting for your work colleagues to start acting more like your work friends again? You can find new communities of like-minded people to socialize with through various apps and websites specifically designed to promote social interaction. Friender and Skout function similarly to dating apps but with an emphasis on friendship and conversation, not romance. Friender finds people anywhere. Skout focuses on your immediate area. Either one could lead quickly to a connection and possibly to a long-lasting friendship. Meetup.com lists groups that are formed for regular discussions of interesting topics, even topics related to your academic field. Some Meetup groups get together in person while others hold discussions online, so a variety of ways of reaching out are possible. On the other hand, Nextdoor.com is designed only for people who live near one another. With this website, you can set your residential area as only a block or two or broaden it to include your entire town. Within Nextdoor.com there are also groups similar to those found on Meetup.com that are devoted to special topics or hobbies.

**Learn something new.** Most colleges and universities allow faculty and administrators to take classes for free on a space-available basis. Even if your school doesn’t offer this benefit, a local community college or adult education center can help you indulge in a new interest at the same time as meeting new people. Have you ever wanted to learn a new language or improve your skills as a photographer? Whatever

interests you, taking a course on that topic is a convenient way to meet new people and expand your social circle. If something as formal as a course sounds like more of a commitment than you want to make, try a book club dedicated to a topic you’d like to explore. Many book clubs have revolving doors of participants: if that particular club is not for you, you can simply try another with no questions asked.

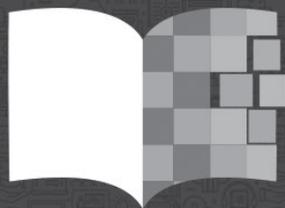
#### **Conclusion**

Toxic loneliness has taken certain faculty and administrators by surprise. Their entire educational experience had given them a built-in social community of colleagues whom they’d come to regard as more than colleagues, relationships that the lockdowns and sudden shift from face-to-face activities to online-only classes and meetings seemed to weaken. While truly severe cases of toxic loneliness are best addressed by a qualified professional, department chairs must be aware of the possibility that this condition may exist in their faculty members (or *themselves*) and take constructive steps to deal with the challenge before the problem becomes even worse. ▲

**Robert E. Cipriano** and **Jeffrey L. Buller** are senior partners in ATLAS: Academic Training, Leadership, and Assessment Services. Email: rcipriano@atlasleadership.com, jbuller@atlasleadership.com

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## Tenure Is under Duress, Part 2: Strategies for Universities, Chairs, and Faculty

N. DOUGLAS LEES

What can we do to stop or slow the movement to end tenure? The answer to this varies with the source of the current threat. The most challenging adversaries that we face are the politically motivated ones, members of legislatures, and governing boards.

**Build trust.** The states where tenure faces banning are primarily conservative states. Looking at red states without tenure challenges may be a worthwhile exercise. Indiana is a very red state, and if you have followed the controversy over vaccine and masking mandates, you know that Indiana University had mandates for both. What does this have to do with tenure? It is related by virtue of the fact that legislative attacks on tenure are found almost exclusively in red states (Hawaii is the exception), and bans on masks and vaccine mandates are found in the same places. IU president Michael McRobbie was able to cash in the trust that he had established and nurtured over the years with members of the legislature and the board to allow him to proceed (Basken 2021). The behind-the-scenes conversations were not easy ones, but IU was able to mandate masks and vaccinations for students, faculty, and staff throughout the pandemic. To date we are unaware of any movements on tenure in the state.

Building trust with political groups is neither easy nor quick to accomplish. It requires frequent and honest communication and depends heavily on establishing sound, personal relationships. President McRobbie was active with the legislature and the politically appointed board in touting the value of the university to the state in concrete terms. Included in his public statements would be items such as the total number of degrees conferred, the number earned by

residents and the number in STEM fields, the amount of external funding earned by faculty (with the amount coming from federal sources broken out), and the overall impact that those dollars have on the state economy. He was attentive to the costs of education for students and their families and instituted programs of financial literacy that together with low to no tuition increases have significantly reduced student debt. These and other favorable initiatives allowed him some latitude in an otherwise hostile political environment.

How many will stay if tenure is abolished for new hires?

**The lifetime job guarantee.** Do you have post-tenure review (PTR)? If so, is it effective? How many faculty have been identified for PTR, and what percentage have improved? How many have resigned to avoid PTR? Do you have a measure for teaching effectiveness that is quantitative and easy to understand? Do senior faculty contribute to service in more meaningful (level and leadership) ways? If some responses are affirmative, have the data ready in case it is needed. A recent study shows that senior faculty (those over sixty-five) remain as productive in publishing as their younger colleagues (Savage and Olejniczak 2021).

**Survey your faculty and others on tenure.** In a survey, ask pretenure faculty whether they would have taken the position they hold without the prospect of

tenure. Many in areas where industry is an employment option will say that accepting the position would require a higher compensation level without the security of tenure. Conduct a similar survey of your PhD students and ask whether they would make their choice of employment based on the availability of tenure. Don't forget to survey your postdoctoral appointees in STEM fields. Research universities rarely hire new PhDs in science and technical fields and routinely prefer those with several years of postdoctoral experience. These data will yield an estimate of the impact on faculty recruiting of not having tenure available.

Also survey your established faculty. The bills proposed to end tenure typically do not affect those already tenured but would create two distinct groups of faculty until the tenured individuals leave or retire. How many will stay if tenure is abolished for new hires? How many will stay after the first faculty member is fired for an arbitrary reason or for the exercise of academic freedom in selecting the subject to research or the material to use in class? The answers here will yield the impact of lost tenure on faculty retention. Calculate the external funding loss for the institution and its effect on the local economy.

**The liberal indoctrination charge.** Too many people are reporting on the cancel culture for it to be a fabrication. Chairs of departments where hot button issues (e.g., abortion, race, gender, police defunding) are routinely discussed should have frank conversations with their faculties as to how those discussions need to take place. Faculty are responsible for structuring the discussions and should have a set of policies that govern these occasions. They should function as facilitators and otherwise remain neutral. Discussion will be civil and respectfully conducted at normal volume. Develop these expectations into a contract with the class. To make these conversations more interesting and educational, consider a debate format with the sides taken randomly assigned.

In 2021, the Academic Leaders Task Force on Campus Free Expression of the Bipartisan Policy Center produced a document titled *Campus Free Expression: A New*

*Roadmap* that provides sound advice for the inclusion of multiple viewpoints and is applicable from the institutional to the classroom levels. It discusses the roles for everyone in the university from the president to certain staff, and it addresses the tension between free expression and diversity, equity, and inclusion. It should be required reading for some of our administrators. Finally, it is difficult to imagine that we will resolve the issues of today without having conversations where all viewpoints are recognized and discussed.

The article by Richard Prystowsky (2021) provides a guide to including viewpoint diversity in discussions of challenging topics. It also outlines the problem we now face when difficult topics are discussed in class or are the subjects of presentations given by visitors to campus. He also shares advice on initiating difficult conversations in the classroom. When we are unable to welcome viewpoint diversity into our campus culture, we as educators are missing a great opportunity to help young scholars hear the other side of the argument and in learning to live with the other side when things do not go our way.

Some of our campus administrations have been guilty of damaging academic freedom and undermining tenure. It is difficult to ascertain why they have been so cavalier and just fire or sanction faculty without following due process requirements. Frustration in dealing with critics or annoying people when combined with the stress of the pandemic, and the low enrollments and diminished finances it has engendered, may be behind the short fuses shown by some of our campus leaders. Others are due to arrogance. Still other examples of where due process is missing are because our administrations are unprepared to deal with the tensions between academic freedom and free expression at points where they intersect with diversity, equity, and inclusion. How does one have a full, frank discussion that includes viewpoint diversity on subjects such as race, gender, or defunding the police without spoken words or ideas that some participants will find uncomfortable, hurtful, or even offensive? We are charged with preparing these young people to successfully work in a world where such conversations are routine, yet in our

institutions, viewpoint diversity is often disallowed or canceled.

What should campus administrations do? First they should reread their own dismissal policies and live with them or start the process of seeking to change them. They need to avoid sanctioning their faculty without following due process. They must also be willing to say no to complaints and calls for faculty dismissals and other sanctions until the case has been thoroughly investigated and faculty peers have made their recommendations. Because the nature of some diversity, equity, and inclusion complaints are so compelling and potentially volatile, perhaps new policies are in order. Such policies should contain the elements of academic freedom and due process and will mandate an accelerated timeline for the consideration of the complaint, including a mechanism to quickly appoint a faculty committee to review the findings. The policy would be made available to both parties to avoid confusion or more complaints.

The following is additional advice that chairs should share with their faculty:

- Before each class, go over everything you will say to identify anything that might be regarded as offensive. Are your examples and anecdotes appropriate? Even if they have been used for years without complaint, they may evoke opposition now due to increased audience sensitivity.
- Alert the class when sensitive materials will be introduced. Provide a rationale for using them and be willing to meet privately with students who remain concerned. If you

remain uncertain, there are others who can provide guidance (senior/minority faculty, chairs, deans).

- In disputes with higher-ups, do not resort to social media to get your way. It will appear vengeful and will cost you some personal capital, at the least.
- Finally, and this may be difficult to accomplish, but you must refrain from initiating confrontations, and you must remain calm and civil when dealing with external critics while the notion of continuing tenure is on the table. Minds are not changed by personal attacks, anger, and insults.

This year should bring the results of lawsuits filed on behalf of faculty who were fired without due process being followed. The outcomes will serve as precedents for other cases. There will also be decisions made on bills to ban tenure in some states. If one falls, will others soon follow? ▲

**N. Douglas Lees** is professor and chair emeritus of biology at Indiana University–Purdue University Indianapolis. Email: nlees@iupui.edu

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## The Dean's Thoughts

### What should chairs do when the faculty and the dean are on opposing sides of an issue?

When there's a significant difference of opinion between the dean and the faculty, the chair has an obligation to help each side understand the other's perspective. You don't do the dean a favor by "protecting" them from what the faculty are thinking. But you also have an obligation to present the dean's perspective to the faculty, as objectively as you can, because there may be larger issues at stake than those that are apparent at the department level. Every dean's style will be different, of course, but most deans appreciate it when chairs, collegially but candidly, provide them with insight into how policies are being received by the people most affected by them.

—**Jeffrey L. Buller** is senior partner in ATLAS: Academic Training, Leadership, and Assessment Services.



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# Using Compassion and Meditation to Buffer the Emotional Labor as a Chair during COVID-19

JANET S. ARMITAGE

Fineman (2000) stated that workplaces are emotional arenas. This appears as a massive understatement today in the broader society and on our campuses. Collectively, we are reeling from the ongoing global COVID-19 pandemic that is disproportionately experienced based on geography, among other social determinants of health. We have campuses that are intermittently returning to in-person learning, maintaining hybrid and online formats, and/or keeping masking requirements. Faculty, staff, and students are trying to deal with prolonged disruptions in learning, illness, and isolation as well as precarious if not stressful returns to campus life that remain fraught with preexisting conditions such as inequity in faculty workloads, staffing shortages, and rising tuition costs. This is an emotional arena and one in which a department chair works to navigate the emotional labor.

I define emotional labor as “the management of feelings to create a publicly observable facial and bodily display intended to produce a particular state of mind in others” (Hochschild 1983, 7). This represents at least two forms in Hochschild’s work—a “surface” and superficial emotional labor akin to saying fake it till you make it and a “deep” labor that reflects authentic intentional emotions and/or modifications to how we internally regulate and align emotions to meet workplace demands. Both types can meet the emotional requirements or normative feeling and display rules of a given situation, yet the presence or absence of emotional authenticity significantly influences outcomes. For example, faking our externally displayed emotions to meet workplace demands can lead to stress, burnout, and interpersonal

strain over time, whereas deep labor can result in greater returns in job satisfaction, performance, well-being, and organizational attachment (Grandey and Gabriel 2015; Hülshager and Schewe 2011).

As a chair and a chair during the pandemic, I understand this difference. While I typically engage in deep labor aligned with normative expectations of a given

**COVID-19 introduced ambiguity, anxiety, and grief with new social distancing from colleagues, family, and friends.**

situation and associated job-related duties, COVID-19 introduced ambiguity, anxiety, and grief with new social distancing from colleagues, family, and friends. This required that I, at times, display emotions that belied my genuine feelings. I, like many, had to develop a dexterity in self-presentation—wearing a mask literally and metaphorically—in response to the disrupted context of the pandemic. My emotional labor performance and management ebbed between surface and deep acting and not without consequences, as the extant literature supports.

The question became, How do I as a chair engage in essential emotional labor during COVID-19 without total depletion and/or superficial displays leading to stress, burnout, and exhaustion? A quick internet

search revealed the many responses to heal workplace stress and burnout, yet these solutions did not necessarily connect to the emotional labor requisite as a chair occupying contradictory and multifaceted positions (e.g., administrator and faculty). I turned to support strategies for emotional work that fit the complex leadership contexts and scholar models of a chair.

I pursued the strategy of compassion and loving-kindness and mindfulness meditations. I began with training before COVID-19 and leaned into these practices as we neared lockdown in 2020. I was introduced to Buddhist-inspired approaches to compassion over an initial eight-week program with the Compassion Institute that defined compassion as “an inherent quality” endowed with empathy and a willingness to respond to, if not alleviate, the suffering of others. I was drawn toward definitions that highlighted the relational and social connectedness of compassion’s response to suffering and the associated meditation techniques that enhance it. I practiced two distinct types of meditation: mindfulness to cultivate intentional presence in the moment and nonjudgmental awareness and loving-kindness to promote connectedness through unconditional caring attitudes toward all beings (Kabat-Zinn 2021).

Training began with breathing and mind-body calming exercises that were far from simple. The biggest challenges were quieting my mind from all the noise of daily life and limiting the negative self-talk when I failed to do so. As I learned basic breathing techniques (e.g., ten deep breaths anchored to breath or another sound to build awareness and mind and body calm), I shifted to locating stress in my body through stress imagery simulations. I felt tension in my neck, and my shoulders would rise and nearly touch my ears. The mindfulness meditation developed my ability to stop and listen (i.e., be present) to my body, calm my sympathetic nervous system, and respond with self-compassion—labeling the experience as a form of suffering and devising an in-the-moment response. Loving-kindness meditations extended the notion of caring for self and others. These were scripted and unscripted meditative intentions, yet I,

as a novice practitioner, used the scripts that included repeating phrases such as “may I have peace,” “may I be happy,” and “may I be free from suffering.” The goal was to cultivate unconditional kindness first for myself and then for a range of others—a loved one, a neutral stranger or acquaintance, a difficult person, and the whole of humanity—to foster connectedness and well-being.

Over time, I developed a diverse adaptable compassion and meditation toolkit that I applied to my role as chair during the pandemic. I was acutely aware of how isolation and an evolving return to campus were affecting the larger community, including persistent ambiguity, masking fatigue, stresses from shifting educational expectations, and recovery from grief and loss of colleagues, friends, or loved ones. Some colleagues and students expressed deep uncertainty and frustration, whereas others feigned public positivity (e.g., “I’m fine”). I, too, had my share of surface acting and moments of exasperation. I tended first to my (re)alignment between genuine intentional emotions and chair demands using my compassion and meditation toolkit. I recognized my rising shoulders and stopped for deep breathing and scripted loving-kindness meditation. This brought awareness and acknowledgment to my emotions that in turn allowed me to manage, modify, and display genuine intentional feelings. I didn’t fake it—plastering on a smile and repeating “I’m fine”—rather I recognized uneasy emotions to be redressed to achieve tasks and promote my well-being and performance rooted in a calm mind and body.

I then turned to others engaging in deep labor with compassionate responding. I began with empathetic listening to others with an openness and recognition of a shared experience. I was present and feeling their uncertainty, hearing their strained voices. I connected this to our common suffering and understood that we all needed unconditional kindness without judgment as part of common humanity. The use of mindful awareness and loving-kindness was reflected in how I asked questions, held space for creative problem-solving and opportunities, maintained intentional undivided presence for others, and modeled genuine emotions

to build connection. Compassion and meditation served as support strategies to sustain my deep emotional labor needed for the paradoxical and multifaceted positions as department chair.

More than two years into the pandemic, I continue with compassion and meditation practices. The inner practices of self-compassion and meditation bring calm and clarity to my mind and body and strengthen my personal awareness and resiliency to better align true emotions to make the work of a chair happen. While I can still struggle with quieting my mind, letting the noise come and go, and staying present, I am certain my practices have enabled me to extend compassion to others with the intentions to be of benefit, to care, and to connect. Although this is not an institution-wide approach to emotional labor on my campus, this connection between self and other is at the heart of compassion and meditation and is argued to be part of “doing the work of an organization ... and instrumental in

replenishing and strengthening individuals’ emotional resources” (Frost 2003, 397), which is essential to the emotional labor of a department chair during COVID-19. ▲

**Janet S. Armitage** is professor and chair of the Department of Sociology at St. Mary’s University. Email: jarmitage1@stmarytx.edu

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## The Academic Leadership Framework for Chairs

STEFAN NIEWIESK AND  
GATES GARRITY-ROKOUS

**D**r. H has recently been appointed as department chair. In her college, the chair is appointed internally and is typically the most senior faculty member who has a solid record as a scholar and is a likeable person. Dr. H has been a good academic citizen and has participated in several committees. For the last few years, she has chaired the department’s promotion and tenure committee. She is current on the latest university issues and has participated in many workshops on such topics as emotional intelligence and the financial challenges of universities due to the pandemic. After a few months in her new position, however, Dr. H concludes that she is not well prepared for her leadership role. When she talks

to her predecessor (now emeritus faculty), she is told that it is normal for a new chair to flounder and that the second term will be better as one gains more experience.

Like our hypothetical Dr. H, many in academia wonder if this pattern is inevitable or even necessary. Yet it feels disturbingly familiar, as most chairs are chosen like Dr. H and do not receive upfront training in academic leadership. If leadership training is provided, it is often focused on self-evaluation (psychometric tests) or general topics of importance in academia and, to a much smaller degree, on hands-on managerial training. In addition, new chairs are rarely provided with guidance as to the how and the what of their position. These gaps

continue despite a strong consensus that the chair's role is both extraordinarily tough (and, postpandemic, increasingly so) and vital to the success of a university and its mission.

To address these gaps, we developed a common framework that defines the core competencies needed to succeed in an administrative leadership position and explored how that framework could be used to help the career progression of individual administrators. Our Academic Leadership Framework is derived from surveys of academic administrators and the general management and academic leadership literature.

We have found that all administrative activities can be sorted into one of six domains of competence: (1) institutional values and professional behaviors, (2) people, (3) decision-making, (4) goal setting, (5) organization, and (6) oversight.

In essence, these domains align well with many institutions' frameworks for defining and evaluating faculty work generally, which includes assessment of research, scholarship, and creative expression; teaching; and service and outreach. Faculty assessment methodologies are widely known and adapted to specific professional disciplines and department needs, but institutions rarely articulate a consistent set of competencies to define and evaluate academic leadership.

There is a key caveat for individual chairs: We believe that faculty are interested in "good" administration (that is, leadership that is perceived as competent, consistent, transparent, and fair), not "nice" chairs (that is, leadership that is perceived as congenial but ineffective). We believe that issues and challenges in a department must be resolved by focusing on good administration, not by improving personal relationships with individuals. The vast majority of faculty do not care if the chair remembers their birthdays, but they do want to be confident that their good performance will earn a promotion.

In the following paragraphs, we provide selected concepts as examples of each of the six domains in our framework. These offer a starting point for further structured exploration of administrative work within an institution or college.

### Domain 1: Institutional Values and Professional Behaviors

The effective administrator needs faculty to engage in department life, and this is conditional on the perceived engagement of the chair. Strong engagement depends on trust, and an effective chair builds trust by deploying institutional values as the basis for administrative work and decision-making. This in turn depends on personal actions that consistently and deliberately translate—and are seen to translate—institutional values into behaviors.

It is helpful to use a reverse analysis to determine whether administrative action reflects the stated values. Similarly, faculty will observe the professional attitude of the chair. Is the chair willing to serve the department and its faculty, and are they willing to do what needs to be done (whether fun or

**New chairs are rarely provided with guidance as to the how and the what of their position.**

not)? Although the knowledge of psychometric evaluations and of important topics in higher education are useful for an administrator in the long term, the short- and medium-term focus must be on work skills (e.g., the written and spoken word, use of a personal assistant, knowledge of personal scripts and documents pertaining to your unit). Remember, leadership is talking about the future and management is implementing it—in other words, leaders are lost without management skills.

### Domain 2: People

An important chair responsibility is to support and guide faculty through their professional life cycle. The cycle starts with recruitment, continues through onboarding and faculty development, and finishes

with retirement and emeritus status. Here we focus our suggestions on recruitment. During recruitment it is important to find the right balance between the evaluation and recruitment of candidates. The chair plays a key role in organizing the search and being both a cheerleader for the department and a coach for future faculty. Every department should have a staffing plan that details the specifics of faculty and staff positions and that helps to determine which people the department is looking for. The staffing plan and the annual department goal help to develop a recruitment narrative—that is, the story that explains to the candidates why they should come and where they fit into the department.

A chair should be knowledgeable about search procedures (e.g., establishing a search committee, behavioral interview questions, how to deal with opportunity hires) and create written guidelines that detail work samples (e.g., seminars, workshops, teaching examples by the candidate), develop a schedule for the visits, and charge people who meet with the candidate with either recruitment or evaluation tasks. The better structured and more consistent the process is, the higher the chance for every candidate to present themselves and their capabilities. When interacting with the candidates, the chair should be able to provide expectations for overall faculty performance and workload (and related documents), information about promotion and tenure, and existing mentoring systems. In addition, they should explain why the candidate should join the department as well as realistic salary expectations and department resource allocation.

### Domain 3: Decision-Making

There is a great body of literature about structured instruments for decision-making to improve the likelihood of thoughtful and consistent decisions. However, less attention is frequently given to practices that reduce decision-making errors. Generally, such errors fall into two categories: systematic errors (bias) and unpredictable errors (noise). Whereas people are typically aware of bias, the contribution of noise to the quality of decision-making is often underestimated.

For a chair, it is important to understand that the only way to reduce noise in decisions is to build structure into the decision-making processes. Noise is expected but unpredictable, and only set procedures, guidelines, and standards help to avoid it.

The chair must also support quality decision-making by groups of faculty and/or staff. For group decision-making, it is important to understand whether the university operates on a shared, participatory, or mixed governance model—in other words, what issues are decided by faculty, and when do they provide feedback? To support committee work, the chair must understand the importance of group sizes, groupthink, (written) rules for committee work, and instruments such as strategic dissenter, brainstorming, and other feedback mechanisms.

#### Domain 4: Goal Setting

Chairs often are provided a strategic plan from their college or asked to generate one for themselves. Rarely, however, do such plans provide chairs with a methodology for implementation. Instead of investing a large amount of time into “fixing” or creating strategic plans, chairs should engage more in the practice of strategic thinking and doing. Chairs should have an understanding of departmental personnel and other resources (staffing, equipment, and facilities plan) and be able to articulate the department’s direction over the next few years (which helps with the recruitment narrative).

Goal setting should be imbedded in all leadership activities. For their daily work with staff, for example, chairs need annual action plans and implementation targets. This keeps their own administrative work on track and reveals possible problems. Annual action plans also must be communicated to faculty, and (far more importantly) faculty need regular, predictable reports on progress made toward plan goals. These communication habits create a feedback loop and help develop a positive climate within the department, thus increasing faculty engagement. This continuous dialogue with faculty also helps with change communication, as faculty are current on what has been done so

far, what the plan is, and what their role is in moving things forward. They also see that the chair is engaged, and they understand how their individual efforts contribute to the success of the entire department.

#### Domain 5: Organization

There are many different resources available for an organizational analysis of a department, such as the academic unit diagnostic tool or the Excellence in Higher Education framework. Typically, organizational improvement requires not only the analysis of what change needs to occur but also the knowledge of how best to implement that change. Such change can be difficult or impossible to execute, however, in situations when chairs have power but faculty have freedom; faculty rarely can be forced to do something, but they also typically do not have the power to implement initiatives or initiate necessary changes. As a result, many chairs seek to advance organizational changes not through faculty but around them.

Chairs seeking to implement change must prevent outgroup formation. Faculty feel excluded or self-exclude from organizational change, which generates further detachment and lack of change support, creating a vicious cycle. Outgroup members are potential flight risks, contribute much less to the common good than their capabilities, and interfere actively or passively with department cohesion. Therefore, chairs seeking to generate organizational change must identify and prevent outgroup formation and work actively to engage their members to induce them to “return” to the department.

#### Domain 6: Oversight

One critical competence for chairs is to ensure the performance of faculty and staff within the department in terms of both productivity and professional behavior. The cycle of performance is simple in theory. Clear expectations must be set in advance, fair evaluations against those expectations must be performed, and consequences (both positive and negative) must result from those evaluations.

Many chairs avoid this oversight cycle because they are not sure how to go about it or because they do not wish to damage their relationships with faculty or staff who do not meet expectations. This avoidance, however, always has measurable negative consequences for the department. Chairs must understand which documents on setting expectations and addressing performance issues already exist and which need to be written (by you or someone else?); how to address performance issues in writing (e.g., during annual review); and how to appropriately engage their dean, the associate dean for academic affairs, and the university’s academic affairs or human resources offices before problems arise and to get advice on and insight into how people are best held accountable at the institution. With such resources at hand, chairs also may need to receive training in negotiations, conflict resolution, or difficult conversations.

#### Conclusion

These examples and concepts illustrate a structured approach that chairs can use to identify useful content for their administrative work. We provide the theoretical background and a more thorough description of the Academic Leadership Framework in our recent publication (Niewiesk and Garrity-Rokous 2021) and conference materials (Niewiesk and Garrity-Rokous 2022). More how-to instructions for individual topics can be found in our toolkit and in our evaluation and assessment document (please email Stefan at [niewiesk.1@osu.edu](mailto:niewiesk.1@osu.edu) for a copy). ▲

*This article is based on a presentation at the 39th annual Academic Chairpersons Conference, February 9–11, 2022.*

**Stefan Niewiesk** is a professor and **Gates Garrity-Rokous** is a vice president and chief compliance officer at The Ohio State University. Email: [niewiesk.1@osu.edu](mailto:niewiesk.1@osu.edu), [garrity-rokous.1@osu.edu](mailto:garrity-rokous.1@osu.edu)

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## Reactions to Netflix's *The Chair*

MARILEE BRESCIANI LUDVIK AND  
LINDA SERRA HAGEDORN

Thanks to Netflix and its limited series *The Chair*, the role of the department chair is now better understood by the general public. Or is it? *The Chair* follows a fictional newly minted department chair sharing her trials and tribulations, along with a good dose of drama, all aimed at a general audience with little to no exposure to academic leadership. But what does *The Chair* actually reveal about university departmental leadership? And what are the *real* issues driving the drama that ring true and have now been laid out for all to see?

The symbolic opening scene of the newly appointed chair walking into her newly assigned office and sitting down at a well-used desk chair that crumbles as soon as she does so is an omen of future doom for the new administrator. The symbolism is obvious and straightforward; just like the office chair itself, the new chair will also collapse in carrying out her duties. What challenges should any new chair become aware of so that they don't meet the same fate?

Using Netflix's *The Chair* as our framework, we discuss three evident challenges that most department leaders face, regardless of their race and gender, that even the general public can now understand and sympathize with.

### Challenge 1: Leading without Authority

In an academic department, virtually all decisions must be negotiated. Department chairs can never tell faculty what to do; they have to convince them to do it. Anyone who has held the chair position can surely empathize with the Netflix chair who became so frustrated with a faculty member that she grabs him by the shoulders and yells at him to “get his s\*\*\* together.” However satisfying as it may seem, this type of action may be appropriate for TV shows but could never

happen in a real-life department. Leading without authority means that while the chair is responsible and accountable to the dean for what faculty say or do or fail to do, she has no actual power to control them.

Suppose a faculty member violates the institutional, college, or departmental code of conduct, as was illustrated in *The Chair*. In that case, the chair's next steps require collaboration with other offices (e.g., human resources, equity, and inclusive excellence) and the dean to create a plan for behavioral

What does *The Chair* actually reveal about university departmental leadership?

correction. The lack of the chair's authority rarely dissuades the typical dean, other faculty, and students from demanding that the chair correct faculty behavior or even dismiss violators. This disconnect between responsibility and authority was clearly seen in *The Chair* when students demanded the immediate dismissal of a faculty member. The Netflix chair found herself in an untenable position. While she sympathized with her faculty member's pedagogical choice where a hand gesture was mistakenly attributed to him being a Nazi, she lacked the power to compel him to apologize, the ability to convince students that he was not a Nazi, or the critical consciousness to positively address the incident with restorative actions. Instead, flaws in the process of university protocol resulted in her ultimate

undoing and a no-confidence vote by her faculty.

### Challenge 2: Living in Two Worlds: Being Both Colleague and Leader (and Feeling Like Neither)

The Netflix series fails to accurately or thoroughly portray how department chairs are appointed or elected. The nonacademic audience likely assumes that moving from a professor to a chair is a highly sought-after promotion. Indeed, the professors in the series all portrayed a desire to become the new chair. Moreover, the public likely believes that “promotion” to chair is similar to promotions outside of academe; taking on a higher position means leaving the old job behind. Also probably assumed is that a promotion is a permanent move. In other words, in the outside world, when people are promoted, they leave their old job behind and assume a new one—never to return. However, members of academia know the truth. Becoming a chair means adding administrative responsibilities to one's current faculty role. In theory, the chair remains a colleague to the faculty while also adding the supervisory role. The addition of administrative duties is not always desired and can be viewed as a burden, and most faculty do not want to take on the position.

When faculty members become the chair, colleagues view them differently. The chair must avoid even the appearance of favoritism toward specific colleagues. Invitations to lunch or an afterwork beer often diminish. The chair no longer fits within the faculty circle, feeling trapped in a netherworld with one foot in the faculty sphere and the other within the administration while navigating both worlds and not disrupting the balance. It's exhausting, thankless work, where previously valued relationships can dissipate in an instant.

Throughout the series, viewers saw depictions of the chair caught in the middle trying to implement her dean's plans while also placating individuals who used to be her colleagues and friends. In the series, the chair navigated her “leadership role,” explaining to her colleagues why the dean's choice for a lecture fellowship award was

more suitable than their in-house current faculty star, who everyone knew was far more worthy. All the while, the chair knew in her heart that if someone else was the chair and advocated for the same issue, she would have joined her colleagues and dug in her heels just as deeply as they did. The Netflix chair, just like most other department chairs, had to face the fact that she was caught between being a member of the faculty and being an administrator while also being viewed as a colleague.

### Challenge 3: Serving at the Pleasure of the Dean While Avoiding the No-Confidence Vote

Chairs must accept the transient nature of the position. Eventually, most department chairs return to the faculty and must resume the role of a colleague among people who may hold a grudge or two. Chairs serve at the pleasure of the dean and can be dismissed for any number of reasons. Tenure may protect the faculty role, but the chair comes with no protections. At the same

time, the faculty can issue a no-confidence vote, forcing the chair to step down and back to the faculty to try to recreate former collegial relationships.

Adding to the other aforementioned challenges, this one explains why most faculty do not desire to become chair. The series ends with the chair feeling unappreciated, misunderstood, and mistreated by her dean while also receiving her colleagues' no-confidence vote. The first season of this series appears to have a happy ending in which the chair reassumes her former faculty role while relieved to be unburdened of the challenges. The new chair, a rather elderly faculty member rife with her own agenda, is seen taking the role. The viewer is left wondering if there is a second season of this limited series, will it feature the failure of this new chair?

### The Broken Chair

The Netflix series clearly implied that happiness is leaving the chair position and returning to the faculty. Thus, the viewer

is reminded of the actual and the symbolic broken office chair. The general public may have been amused and may have learned something of the role of the academic department chair. But for us, active participants in the process, it is not entertainment. We conclude with the knowledge that the job of a department chair comes with many challenges. We see the need for targeted professional development and perhaps some systemic change that would support chairs avoiding actual and symbolic collapse. ▲

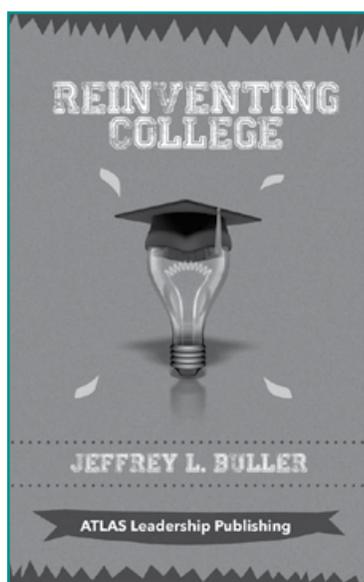
**Marilee Bresciani Ludvik** is professor and chair of educational leadership and policy studies at the University of Texas at Arlington. **Linda Serra Hagedorn** is professor emeritus and former department chair at Iowa State University. Email: marilee.ludvik@uta.edu, lindah@iastate.edu

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# The Interim Chair: Joys, Challenges, and Better Practices

ANGELA MURPHY

In January 2018, I unexpectedly and reluctantly became an interim department chair. I remained in the role until October of that year. Although I was a tenured associate professor, I was fully unprepared to become an administrator. Nevertheless, I learned a great deal. I wish to share the joys, challenges, and better practices I discovered to ease the transition into this role for those who might be in a similar situation.

## Joys

The joys of being an interim department chair included aha moments, status, cohesion, information previews, and impact.

**Aha moments.** I had a more holistic understanding of how things worked in my university and better insight into the challenges facing the institution. At an internal administrators' conference, I sat at the table with a diverse group of people. I learned about NCAA compliance, performance-based funding metrics, executive perspectives on the strategic plan, tech company partnerships to diversify the STEM pipeline, and the lack of employee follow-up that sometimes occurs, even if you're a dean seeking information.

**Status.** Some people positively respond to those with more positional power. Once I became chair, there was a noticeable uptick in the number of people I met who claimed to already know me. I initially enjoyed the increased notoriety, but that waned, as it usually came with requests for jobs or favors.

**Cohesion.** There were also regular chair meetings that were monotonous but that built camaraderie among all the chairs. My colleagues were welcoming, helpful, and open about the challenges of the position.

**Information previews.** As an administrator, I was sometimes privy to

announcements before they were widely released to faculty or staff. This made me feel like an insider to some degree.

**Impact.** I met with junior faculty and instructors to learn their goals and concerns. Once I had that information, I intermittently checked on their progress, shared relevant information, and provided updates on their requests. Even if the answer was no, it was important for them to know that I tried, why it didn't work out, and what might be done in the future.

Rather than set lofty goals, focus on small adjustments that will make your job easier.

## Challenges

Although there were several joys to being an interim department chair, there were also challenges. These included teaching overloads, complaints and incessant meetings, illusion of authority, cumbersome faculty searches, no dedicated staff support, and less family time.

**Teaching overloads.** The chair position came with a reduced teaching load. However, due to timing and an unplanned resignation, that reduction did not happen. As a result, I was teaching overloads while serving as interim chair.

**Complaints and incessant meetings.** As a faculty member, I was used to hearing complaints from my students. As an interim chair, I listened to gripes from

the department's students, faculty, and administrators. Being chair came with a slight bump in pay but an enormous increase in meetings. My meetings had meetings. The emotional labor involved in performing the role was draining. I came to relish the few moments of quiet when they occurred.

**Illusion of authority.** Prior to becoming chair, I assumed that the role had some level of decision-making power. As time went on, I realized that there were far fewer decisions that I could make; I did not have a budget to hire someone or reward faculty who were high achievers.

**Cumbersome faculty searches.** There was a laborious process for hiring adjuncts or professors, including enumerable steps across several university departments. I reached out to local doctoral programs, family members, and faculty for adjunct referrals with limited success. The search committee for full-time positions was not working with deliberate speed and used unclear criteria to review applicants. By the time they made recommendations, it was nearly summer, and most of the candidates did not meet the stated expectations or had already taken other positions. I had to scramble to find temporary full-time instructors.

**No dedicated staff support.** Although I was told to ask one of the interim dean's staff for assistance, there was not a person who was officially designated to provide support to chairs. When I did request help, my work was a lower priority, so I tended to do it myself.

**Less family time.** The other chairs had adult children or were childless; I was married with a typical three-year-old and an eleven-year-old with learning differences. My husband traveled one to two weeks a month. It was always a delicate balance, but it was even more so after I became chair. There was a marked increase in the use of babysitters and my husband taking care of the kids, as I had to work into the evenings and on weekends. My husband did a cost-benefit analysis and concluded that becoming chair did not make financial sense.

### Better Practices

The joys and challenges led to five “better” practices (i.e., WIRMS) to use when contemplating whether to become an interim department chair. They are work-life balance, incremental improvements, realistic job previews, a manual, and staffing. I use the term *better* instead of *best* because there are no optimal solutions that apply to every situation or person.

**Work-life balance.** There is a learning curve in any new position. Proactively talk to your partner about rebalancing the household responsibilities to have more time to settle into this new role. Talk to your children about how this new job might impact their routines so that they aren’t surprised when things are different (e.g., who takes them to games, why you are home but can’t play with them). Establish protected time to support your well-being; this was pre-COVID-19, so I scheduled monthly facials and massages to relax. I should’ve had more frequent blocks of protected time to do research, exercise, or just sleep.

**Incremental improvements.** Rather than set lofty goals, focus on small adjustments that will make your job easier. The amount of communication will dramatically increase when you become an administrator; plan for this. One small adjustment that I made was the creation of a department Blackboard site for announcements and submissions, (e.g., annual plans, evaluations, CVs), as it was cumbersome to use email to individually track communication and documents.

**Realistic job previews.** I agreed to the position because I thought it was the right thing to do. I didn’t ask many questions, and there was a time constraint to respond. I should’ve critically reflected on what I needed to most effectively operate in the chair role. Before accepting a position, ask questions about the tasks, time commitment, autonomy, and budget so that you have a realistic framework for understanding what’s expected and the authority to make impactful decisions. You will need this information to make an informed decision. Negotiate; ask for the

resources that will support your success (e.g., staff, technology, workshops, flexible class formats). If you don’t know what to request, meet with the outgoing chair for suggestions.

**Manual.** There was little documentation on how to complete day-to-day tasks (e.g., grade disputes, scheduling, holding faculty members accountable). I had to make calls, send emails, and cajole people to get the most basic things done. While no book

can cover every situation, ask for a go-to reference for common tasks, reports, and deadlines.

**Staffing.** Request a graphic that explains the hiring process from the school to the university level so that you fully understand the steps, key others, and time frames. Ask your network if anyone is interested in adjuncting in the future so that there are already names to contact when needs arise. If possible, set up an adjunct job

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bank to cast a wide net to fill anticipated position demands. Although I couldn't do this at my institution, I sent the names of possible adjuncts that I had collected to the returning chair.

### Conclusion

It's been four years since I was an interim department chair. After initially leaving that role, I started to write this article but stopped several times. I wasn't ready to fully process what happened and then the pandemic occurred. Completing this article helped me realize how much I learned in that position. It is my hope that the better practices (i.e., WIRMS) can assist others in thoughtfully considering the role of interim department chair. ▲

**Angela Murphy** is associate professor of management at Florida A&M University. Email: [angela.murphy@famu.edu](mailto:angela.murphy@famu.edu)

## Preparing for the Next Leadership Position, Part 2: Getting Your Foot in the Door

MARKUS POMPER AND  
MARGARET THOMAS EVANS

In the last article, we discussed that advancing to a dean or associate dean position from a department chair position often involves applying at universities other than our own. In this article, we will explore two key documents in this process: the curriculum vitae and the cover letter. While many searches require additional documents, such as a list of references, a statement of leadership philosophy, or a diversity statement, we believe that the CV and the cover letter are the most critical. These two documents will highlight your skills and tell your story. They must convince the hiring committee

that considering your application will be worth their time. You should therefore create both documents specifically for each position to which you want to apply. Because you must customize your application materials for each position anew, be sure to submit exactly those documents that are requested—no more and no less.

The curriculum vitae is intended to summarize your accomplishments as an academic administrator. This skill set is different from the skill set of a faculty member, and you should organize the CV accordingly. At the most basic level, a dean is a

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leader of an academic unit. Your CV should therefore highlight your accomplishments as they relate to leading an academic unit. The primary responsibilities in this regard are supervising faculty and staff, managing the budget, and overseeing the curriculum. The position description will also list additional required skills, such as fundraising or enrollment management. Organize your CV so that these skills are front and center. We recommend creating a section titled “Key Achievements in Academic Administration,” which will immediately follow the section on education. It is appropriate to use bullet points to list task forces that you have chaired or committees that you have led, but each entry should include a brief statement on your role within the group and what was accomplished. Be sure to focus on the big three—people, money, and curriculum—and to provide enough information to lead the hiring committee to an understanding of the scope of the responsibilities you have held. For example, a section on personnel supervision could include how many full-time and adjunct faculty you are currently

supervising, how many searches you have completed, and how many faculty members you have mentored to tenure and promotion. If your department has a mentoring program for junior faculty, you should also mention that within this section.

**While many searches require additional documents, we believe that the CV and the cover letter are the most critical.**

Teaching and research are usually not a significant portion of a dean’s workload, and your accomplishments in these areas should therefore be brief. For example, it is

appropriate to summarize your teaching experience in a concise list that gives the reader an impression of your classroom expertise. Listing the specifics of every course you have ever taught is counterproductive, as it will distract from your leadership qualities. Likewise, presentations and publications in your discipline, while necessary for faculty, are of less interest when searching for a dean position. It is only necessary to list recent or significant works from your career. If your scholarly work includes presentations and articles on leadership, these should be highlighted as they demonstrate your dedication to and interest in leadership. However, many dean position descriptions indicate that the finalist will be hired with rank and tenure. In this case, you should include sufficient detail in your research and teaching sections to allow the hiring committee to conclude that you could be appointed with rank and tenure at their institution if you should be the finalist.

We recommend using the CV to list your leadership experience. By contrast, the cover letter tells the reader how you get things

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done and how you anticipate applying these experiences in your new position. The cover letter should specifically address the key requirements for the position as outlined in the job description, but unlike the CV, you want to provide context. As with the CV, we recommend that you tailor your cover letter to each position to which you apply and address the requirements that are listed in the position description as much as possible. However, keep in mind that you do not want to stretch your hiring committee's patience. While a cover letter for an administrative position may be longer than your average cover letter for a faculty position, we recommend a length of three or four pages. As you write the cover letter, examine the requirements from the position description, research the institution's website, and infer which of your leadership experiences are most salient for the position. Use the cover letter to illustrate your ability to seek opportunities, create compromise, and build alliances while also indicating how you anticipate applying these skills in your future position. Your cover letter should

succinctly convince the hiring committee that your leadership experience matches the anticipated needs of the institution at which you are applying. Because you are applying for an academic leadership position, your cover letter must emphasize your leadership skills as opposed to your effectiveness in the classroom and your acumen as a researcher.

Your primary task is to demonstrate that you have the necessary experience and

to convey that you are the right candidate for the position based on the institution's mission, vision, and values. Your ultimate goal is to make it to the short list and get an interview! ▲

**Markus Pomper** is dean of the School of Natural Sciences and Mathematics and **Margaret Thomas Evans** is associate dean of the School of Humanities and Social Sciences at Indiana University East. Email: [mpomper@iu.edu](mailto:mpomper@iu.edu), [margevan@iue.edu](mailto:margevan@iue.edu)

### Chair Tip

#### Advice for Incoming Chairs

- *Move to collective thinking.* It is no longer “I, me, my” but “we, us, our.”
- *Maintain and build personal credibility.* New chairs enter with presumed credibility that must be converted to earned credibility through actions while at the helm.
- *Prepare for change.* Change in department responsibility, external pressures and opportunities, fiscal restrictions, and other influences means that chairs must be prepared to lead change in ways that will require innovative thinking and the willingness to depart from some elements of academic tradition.
- *Identify activities for personal growth.* Create personal visibility and productivity through collaboration, involvement with campus-level projects, or professional organizations and administrative groups.

—**N. Douglas Lees** is professor and chair emeritus of biology at Indiana University–Purdue University Indianapolis.



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## Special Topics: Hiring Strategies

# Asking the Right Questions: Crafting Inclusive Interview Questions

CAMILLE S. JOHNSON

Questions for faculty candidates are like family heirlooms—each committee takes the questions from the most recent search, adds a few tweaks, and fires away. Rarely do committees start with the hiring criteria they have outlined in the job description and then use interview questions to find information relative to those criteria. Instead, the hand-me-down questions are redundant with information that can be gained from reference letters, cover letters, and CVs. Moreover, committees often have not thought about how interview questions provide advantages to some candidates and create the opportunity for pre-held preferences and biases by committee members to influence outcomes. Flawed interview questions and processes open the door for what psychologists call attributional ambiguity. Attributional ambiguity arises when the existence of multiple potential reasons for a decision that results in biased outcomes allows people to avoid acknowledging that biases influenced the decision (Brower, Schwartz, and Bertrand Jones 2019). For example, it is common for search committees to raise concerns about fit with a department when members of minoritized groups are equally qualified and not selected (Biernat and Kobrynowicz 1997). Next, I discuss three principles for developing interview questions that reduce attributional ambiguity and then share one illustrative example of a flawed common interview question.

### Guiding Principles

**Determine the questions before the candidates are decided.** Creating a standard set of interview questions prevents committee members from shaping questions

to fit specific candidates—either to their detriment or benefit. Structured interview tactics can reduce confirmation bias, or when people ask questions that confirm their initial perceptions of a candidate

Creating a standard set of interview questions prevents committee members from shaping questions to fit specific candidates.

(Raveendra, Satish, and Singh 2020). For example, if a candidate attended a high-status graduate program, the halo effect may lead the committee to presume that the candidate's research preparation is high and ask questions that confirm that assumption.

Structured interviews also ensure that all candidates can provide the same information and reduce reliance on assumed answers. For example, when interviewing an internal candidate, a committee may gloss over questions because they think they already have this information through personal experience. However, the candidate may have experiences or opinions that the committee is not aware of. Skipping the questions prevents the candidate from

sharing this important information and, when comparing candidates, forces the committee to compare actual answers provided by one candidate with the presumed answers of another candidate.

**Be straightforward: Know how answers to the questions are relevant to the hiring criteria.** Interview time is precious. In initial screening interviews, candidates may have only twenty to fifty minutes to provide a committee with the information it needs to make an informed decision. Every question should be diagnostic and map directly to the committee's criteria for evaluation. If the committee cannot articulate the information they hope to gain from a question and how that information *directly* pertains to the criteria listed in the job ad, it should not be asked. For example, the first question in most interviews is some version of “tell us about yourself and why you want this job.”

Although this question seems benign, it is ambiguous, difficult to answer, and not diagnostic. Candidates don't know whether to talk about themselves or the institution. Committee members may differ in what they want to learn. While committees hope that this big, ambiguous question might allow that someone will shine through with an unexpected answer or extraordinary charisma, ambiguous questions are more likely to result in getting different information from each candidate or information unrelated to the hiring criteria and that opens the door for bias.

Because the answer to this question often overlaps with later, more substantive questions, the committee should honor everyone's time by leading off with questions that are clearly tied to the hiring criteria. For example, if the institution has a specific mission, the candidate could be asked about how they would fulfill that mission through scholarship, teaching, and service. To allow for unique answers and unexpected information, at the end of the interview, the committee could ask, “Is there anything that

we haven't asked that you think we should know about you?"

**Treat the interview as speed dating, not as an exam.** Academics inherently fear making a question "too easy" or of telegraphing a "right" answer. And although a candidate's academic preparation within a discipline should be apparent in their CV, cover letter, and research statement, committees tend to not believe what they see. Together, these habits lead to committees asking *test* questions instead of *learn* questions in interviews. One pitfall of test questions is that a "correct" answer may require having information that may be differentially available to candidates. For example, a potential department chair may be asked about their vision for the department. A candidate with a contact in the department, or an internal candidate, will have more information about the department than a truly external candidate and can better match their answers to the preferences of the committee. One remedy for this is to make sure that every candidate has the information needed to answer each question. All candidates should be provided access to the current department, college, or university strategic plan, a list of current courses, and other information. Even better, sharing this information and the interview questions before the interview gives candidates who are quick on their feet and those with a more deliberate processing style a chance to answer the questions completely and authentically.

Another pitfall is creating questions with too many parts. Just as instructors may write an exam that has only three questions, with each question having five subsections, committees may combine multiple questions into one long one. For example, one question about teaching might ask candidates how they would create learning outcomes, use multiple teaching modalities, and craft assignments to support inclusive excellence in a course. An experienced candidate could probably spend several minutes talking about each part of that question and may have difficulty knowing which parts of the question are most important to the committee. And if candidates have submitted

sample syllabi, portions of the questions are redundant. To avoid this, committees determine ahead of time where they will gather information relevant to the hiring criteria and use interview time for information that cannot be obtained from submitted materials. For example, if teaching experience or specific pedagogy is important, they can request syllabi, a list of courses taught, or sample assignments that demonstrate that pedagogy. Then, in the interview, they can reference those materials to gain more information.

### Case Study: "What Classes Are You Interested in Teaching?"

This is a favorite question among recruitment committees. It feels like an easy question and a way to get to know the candidate. However, this question violates the principles described earlier. First, this question is ambiguous with regard to how it relates to hiring criteria, and the "right" answer may require additional information. A job description usually indicates the desired areas of scholarship and teaching, and departments have specific teaching needs. The candidate's cover letter should address their preparation and enthusiasm for that area, and this question is redundant. Moreover, there are many "wrong" answers to the question. Because the submitted materials already describe their interest in the specified area, a candidate may think the committee wants to hear about their breadth of knowledge and talk about a class outside of the described disciplinary area. If the candidate mentions a class that is "owned" by a current faculty member, the committee could assume that candidate would not be satisfied or would not fit with the department. If the candidate fails to talk about a second area of need in the department, it could be erroneously interpreted as an unwillingness to teach that topic. Finally, if the candidate talks only about a narrow list of classes, this could be interpreted as a lack of breadth, lack of flexibility, or lack of potential for intellectual growth. Because the question is not aligned with hiring criteria and is nondiagnostic, what committee members view as a compelling or "right"

answer can shift with other preferences and biases.

Instead of fishing for interest, ask candidates specifically about areas of need. For example, "The department has a growing need to teach methods. Do you have experience teaching that course or other experiences or training that would enable you to teach methods in the next few years?" Or, "This position would lead our curriculum development in area X. What experiences or training do you have in developing curricula beyond and within the classes currently taught (as described in the list provided)?" Or skip the question and use the time for questions most closely related to the hiring criteria.

### Summary

- Interviews are opportunities to gather specific information, not a get-to-know-you opportunity. Use the time to focus on obtaining information clearly and objectively related to hiring criteria.
- Provide every candidate with the information (e.g., links to courses, mission statement, sample syllabi) needed to answer all questions and give them time to formulate authentic answers.
- Assessments of candidates should be based on information provided by the candidate in responses to the questions, not based on assumptions or extrapolations. ▲

**Camille S. Johnson** is associate dean for research and faculty success in the College of Social Sciences at San Jose State University. Email: camille.johnson@sjsu.edu

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# Making Reference Checks More Valuable to the Hiring Process

STEVEN TOLMAN AND DANIEL W. CALHOUN

Although each higher education job search process varies, they typically all require conducting reference checks as the last step before hiring an applicant. Some colleges and universities require search committees to contact the references of all final candidates (regardless of whether they're being considered for the position) while other institutions will simply contact the references of their top candidate only. In either case, these reference checks often serve as a signal to candidates that the employer's search is nearing a close and that acceptance offers—or rejections—are imminent. Although reference checks have become one of the ubiquitous final steps in the hiring process for higher education administration positions, we must question their usefulness. Have reference checks become an antiquated step in the hiring process?

Candidates do freely select who to include as a reference, and with few exceptions, most are savvy enough to list only those references who will speak well of them. From a critical and realistic perspective of a hiring manager, how much value does this step add to the hiring process? Given the timing and design of the reference check, would any information gathered actually alter the decision to offer the position to a candidate?

Through our various roles in higher education administration and academic affairs, we've served on countless search committees and conducted just as many reference checks. The vast majority of reference checks come back absolutely glowing. References provide a lengthy list of the candidate's strengths but lack constructive feedback beyond the potential hire being a perfectionist, working too hard, or needing to take on a greater level of responsibility. Admittedly, we wish these were truly our/their only weaknesses, but we know better.

References want to see their respective

colleagues succeed in their job search, so they're quite wary of sharing negative or objective feedback. This leaves employers lacking key information about potential hires. Furthermore, the hiring system imposes an artificial level of importance on references who are actually strangers to us professionally and personally and likely have no real knowledge of our campus culture or department needs. Therefore, most hiring committees take references' feedback with a grain of salt.

So what's the solution or alternative? Although it may go against traditional hiring practices in the field of higher education, we argue it's time to flip the script on the manner in which reference checks are conducted, with the intention of replacing their futile aspects with strategies to gather meaningful insight into potential hires. To make this happen, we can simply envision the way we conduct reference checks, according to our following proposal. We need to start by changing the timing and purpose of reference checks. After we've screened all résumés, conducted phone interviews, and met in person with the top candidates for on-campus interviews, we should have confidence in the information gathered and feel ready to make an initial offer to the best

candidate, letting them know we'll still also be following up with their references.

At that point, we can explain to their references that we've already conditionally offered the position to the candidate, and that barring learning something that would legally or ethically require us to reconsider the conditional job offer, we plan to hire them for the position.

Knowing the candidate has already received a job offer, the pressure is removed from the references, who may now be more inclined to provide their honest, objective, and candid perspectives. And the references will likely feel free to more openly communicate not only what the potential new hire does really well but also some of their challenges and shortcomings, which would serve as valuable insight to their soon-to-be supervisor, who can then proactively address these areas with the new employee as soon as they start in their position. If we move away from making reference checks the ubiquitous final step before offering a candidate a position and instead use them as a tool to strengthen the development of new hires, we may remove the inherent futility of the existing reference check method and transform it into an important, meaningful, and valuable part of the hiring and onboarding process. ▲

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**Steven Tolman** is assistant professor and **Daniel Calhoun** is associate professor of educational leadership in the College of Education at Georgia Southern University. Email: [stolman@georgiasouthern.edu](mailto:stolman@georgiasouthern.edu), [dwcalhoun@georgiasouthern.edu](mailto:dwcalhoun@georgiasouthern.edu)

## The Dean's Thoughts

### How is the dean's world different from the chair's world?

In the open systems organizational perspective, a department's effectiveness is based on what happens within it as well as how its relationships with key constituents in the task environment are managed. This is a quid pro quo relationship that suggests that departments will be resourced with the students, curriculum approvals, accreditations, and operating funds it needs based on its ability to supply important members in the task environment with the graduates, courses, quality programs, and efficient operations demanded by those who provide these requirements for successful department operations. A look at the dean's world from this perspective will help chairs understand the constraints and opportunities that affect department operations within a dean's college.

—Don Chu is a former professor, chair, and dean.

## Lawsuits and Rulings

### Academic Freedom

**Case:** *Meriwether v. Hartop et al.*, No. 20-3289 (6th Cir. 03/26/21)

**Ruling:** The US Circuit Court of Appeals, Sixth Circuit, reinstated a Shawnee State University professor's suit.

**Significance:** A public university violates the First Amendment when it tries to mandate what is orthodox in politics, nationalism, religion, or other matters of opinion.

**Summary:** The plaintiff was a Shawnee State University philosophy professor. On the first day of class in January 2018, the plaintiff called on a student who appeared to be a male by addressing the student as "sir."

After class, the student demanded to be referred to as a woman with "feminine titles and pronouns," but the plaintiff said that his sincerely held religious beliefs prevented him from communicating messages about gender identity that he believed were false.

After the plaintiff reported the confrontation to the administration, a dean told the plaintiff that he would be violating university policy if he didn't address the student as a woman. The plaintiff instead adopted the practice of referring to the complaining student only by last name.

Even though the student didn't object to the ultimate solution to the conundrum, Shawnee State placed a written reprimand in the plaintiff's file. The plaintiff then filed a suit claiming a violation of the First Amendment. However, the trial court judge dismissed the case.

On appeal, Shawnee State argued that the judge's ruling was correct because the use of pronouns was simply a ministerial function having nothing to do with academic freedom.

The appellate court said that three critical interests supporting the protection of a public university professor's "robust speech" were the students' interest in receiving informed opinions, the professor's right to disseminate his own opinion, and the public's interest in exposing future leaders to

different viewpoints.

The panel also ruled that a public university couldn't force professors to avoid controversial viewpoints altogether in deference to a state-mandated orthodoxy; Shawnee State's directive wasn't simply ministerial because it was designed to convey a message that people could have a gender identity inconsistent with their sex at birth; and the plaintiff's refusal to convey the message involved a matter of academic freedom. The appellate court ordered the trial court judge to reinstate the suit. ▲

### Due Process

**Case:** *Sutton v. Stony Brook University et al.*, No. 18-CV-7434 (E.D. N.Y. 11/05/20)

**Ruling:** The US District Court, Eastern District of New York, dismissed a former graduate student's suit against Stony Brook University.

**Significance:** A university's due process obligations are far less onerous if a student's dismissal is for academic reasons instead of disciplinary charges. Courts should show great respect for a faculty's decision unless it was such a substantial departure from accepted academic norms as to demonstrate that there wasn't any professional judgment.

**Summary:** The plaintiff was a Stony Brook University graduate student who asked the program director in September 2017 for a female supervisor because she believed that the male supervisor was harassing her.

The program director notified the plaintiff a few days later that her last day of student teaching would be in mid-October. The plaintiff immediately complained to the SBU president about being removed from student teaching before finishing her requisite hours.

On October 16, the program director emailed the plaintiff a student teaching contract to be signed. The vice provost dismissed the plaintiff approximately nine days later for the stated reason of failing to sign

the student teaching contract.

The plaintiff filed a suit, and one of her claims was a violation of due process because she had not been granted a hearing before being removed from student teaching and dismissed from the program. The university filed a motion to dismiss.

The district court judge said that a student facing academic dismissal wasn't entitled to a hearing because a university's due process obligations were far less onerous if a student's dismissal was for academic reasons instead of disciplinary charges.

She also said that courts should show great respect for a faculty's decision unless it was such a substantial departure from accepted academic norms as to demonstrate a lack of professional judgment.

She acknowledged that the line between the two types of dismissals wasn't always clear but said that an academic dismissal usually involved a student's deficiency in necessary skills, and disciplinary dismissals didn't concern the analytical expertise of professional academicians.

The judge decided that the plaintiff had been dismissed for academic reasons because signing the student teaching contract was an academic requirement and there weren't any charges involving student conduct rule violations. She dismissed the claim but allowed the plaintiff a chance to amend. ▲

### CALL FOR PAPERS

We invite our readers to submit articles for possible publication in *The Department Chair*. The subject should be relevant to department chairs, and the focus should be on practical applications and strategies. We also welcome ideas for subjects of interest to academic leaders that we should develop into articles.

Articles submitted for consideration should be 1,000 to 1,500 words and can be sent as email attachments to editor-dch@wiley.com.

## Book Reviews

### The Department Chair Field Manual: A Primer for Academic Leadership

Don Chu

KDP, 2021

244 pp., \$30.00



One of the most glaring leadership shortcomings in higher education is the paucity of sound scholarship on the training and development of leaders.

It seems that leadership is to professors as water is to goldfish: They swim in it but never think to study it. Over the years, the attention chairs have received in the literature is primarily anecdotal. Don Chu's *The Department Chair Field Manual* is the exception, as it bridges the gap between theory and practice. From his vast and insightful experience of forty years as a professor, chair, dean, and central administrator, coupled with his international consulting and comprehensive study of department chairs, Chu has created a field manual instrumental in guiding new chairs.

The chair position represents the most critical role in the university, and it is the most unique management position in America. Deans add that their success depends on the leadership capabilities of department chairs, and many provosts and presidents concur that the most critical role in the university is that of department chair. As Chu astutely surmises, chairs can be more powerful than chancellors.

Chu recognizes that academics first receive training in research and bring a strong scholarly background to their chair position. But learning to be a professor is different from learning to lead. Chairs come to their positions without leadership training, without prior executive experience, without a clear understanding of the ambiguity and complexity of the role, and without recognition of the metamorphic changes that occur as one transforms from professor to chair.

Chu's superb book offers the right remedy to begin to address this dearth of leadership preparation. Too much is at stake in this era of change and challenge to leave leadership to chance or taking turns. Unclear lines of succession, lack of training, high stress, and alarming turnover rates all suggest that academic leaders are not groomed in ways that promote longevity, effectiveness, and success.

Why is this book needed? The field manual is different from most chair preparation books, as it granularly lays out concrete steps for chairs to succeed. Readers can also pick and choose the chapters, checklists, options, and sections most important to them.

There is no better book to prepare chairs for job entry than *The Department Chair Field Manual*.

How should leaders be prepared? In 1996, only 3 percent of universities reported any systematic leadership preparation program for chairs, and not much has changed in the past two decades (3.3 percent). Corporate and academic scholars posit three essential components needed to develop new academic leaders: (1) a conceptual understanding of the unique institutional context of universities and the roles and responsibilities of academic leaders; (2) the skills necessary to achieve results and be successful; and (3) the practice of reflection to learn from self-discovery. All three of these components are strategically embedded in *The Department Chair Field Manual*.

Chapters 1 and 2 in part 1 bring attention to the contextual understanding of the historical and sociopolitical territory of the

university as well as management models and frameworks, thus allowing chairs to grasp the many dimensions of campus leadership. Chu coaches chairs to delve into their program's history and curriculum as well as the institution's calendar. By understanding how universities operate, chairs can make use of distinctive organizational, political, and cultural strategies to create change to meet twenty-first-century challenges.

Although the conceptual understanding is a necessary condition to lead effectively, it is not sufficient preparation without the second component: applying appropriate behavior and skills. Another unique difference from most chair preparation books is that Chu recognizes that chairing is a people position. Part 2 provides the breadth and depth of what chairs need to know and do to succeed. They must understand effective ways to manage time, build consensus, accommodate dissent, and reconcile differences.

Chapter 5 provides astute insight into managing other on-campus leaders and off-campus stakeholders and contacts. Chapter 6 gives chairs a look at the dean's world as well as the knowledge needed to build a trusting relationship and to secure the dean's confidence.

Field manuals are short on theory and long on practical ideas and strategies. Typical university policy manuals provide lists of chair responsibilities, such as fragmented duties of organizing, distributing, supervising, budgeting—a pathological listing without focus on the most critical tasks for chairs. Chu makes these duties come alive in organic fashion. He takes chairs through an assessment of the field of operations in chapter 7. The operational terrain is altered in terms of time (from focused to fragmented), workloads, meetings, collegial relationships, locus of control, and power over resources. His fluid and focused writing and rich case studies in this chapter bring the issues and realities into the light and

offer suggestions to help chairs face similar situations.

Chapter 8 is equally rich in translating unfamiliar chair tasks into maneuvers (actions and behaviors) used to place their departments advantageously into positions for advancement. Sage maneuvers help chairs achieve their mission by moving quietly and gently, assessing adversaries and possible dangers, looking for allies, having multiple routes, sending up trial balloons, determining priorities, avoiding personal duels, and avoiding a fight you can't win.

Part 3 provides a management manifesto: what chairs need to know and when to do it. Chu's valuable checklists provide guidance. Chu also walks the reader through a series of critical checklists and to-do lists in chapters 12 and 13. Chairs' routine tasks can become so complicated that mistakes of one kind or another are inevitable. It is too easy to miss a step or to forget to ask a critical question in times of stress and pressure. Experts need checklists and to-do lists to guide them through key phases in complex and politically and culturally sensitive situations.

Ultimately, chair development is an inner journey and often the most difficult transformation—from faculty to leader. The reflective practice component of leadership development, the third condition for leader preparation, emerges in the field manual from Chu's reflective writing and the questions he poses throughout the book. These probing questions force the reader into personal awareness and self-knowledge. It is about chairs finding their personal voice: "What kind of chair do you want to be?" (chapter 4), "How do you prepare your attitudes and emotions?" (chapter 9), "What is your plan of work?" (chapter 11). Each chapter is peppered with questions that challenge chairs to be introspective and to reflect on their new leadership role.

Part 4 highlights and explores one of the most glaring shortcomings of the position—the scarcity of sound advice on the training and transition of leaders. Chu concludes the book with two modest options for early chair training: a chair internship prior to taking office and a summer school for chairs

taken over the months immediately before officially assuming the role. Add to this the practice of continuous learning during the course of the chair's term with cohorts of chair colleagues (council of chairs). Because leadership by its very nature involves relationships with others, an ongoing program would offer numerous opportunities to confer, work, and interact with colleagues who are experiencing similar challenges.

Deans, provosts, and presidents must invest in the development of their academic leaders. There is no better book to prepare chairs for job entry than *The Department Chair Field Manual*. Although the book primarily focuses on the development of new chairs, a slight footnote could be added. While it is true that it takes about a year for most new chairs to get their feet on the ground, the audience for this book should also include veteran chairs who come to their positions from outside the institution. They must also deal with the socialization process of building an institutional knowledge base and a network of colleagues.

The proper place for your field manual is not shelved in your academic bookcase but set on your desk, at your side. As you begin to read, with a highlighter and pen in hand, start by writing not only your plan but also your legacy: How would you want to be remembered by your colleagues? Ultimately, at the end of your tenure as chair, as you prepare to leave your position, ask yourself, How can I "leave right"? The transition to the next chair should not be the usual passing of the gavel but a passing of the baton in a period of transition whereby both the incumbent and the incoming chair work together. Chu suggests that the new chair interview the outgoing chair to ask critical questions: What are the greatest challenges? What opportunities will the department have next year? What advice can you give me? Then the outgoing chair should present the new chair with the baton and a copy of Chu's field manual as a token of their mutual commitment to the department's success. ▲

Reviewed by **Walter H. Gmelch**, professor of leadership studies and dean emeritus at the University of San Francisco. Email: whgmelch@usfca.edu

## The Department Chair: A Practical Guide to Effective Leadership

Christopher J. Jochum

Rowman & Littlefield, 2021  
206 pp., \$35.00



Whether you are thinking about becoming a department chair, stepping into the role, have been in the role for some time, or are a key supporter/cheerleader for a department chair, Christopher Jochum's *The Department Chair: A Practical Guide to Effective Leadership* should be added to the top of your reading list. Jochum's friendly and accessible writing style reads like coffee with a close friend and gives the hard work of chairing a fresh feel. He includes thought-provoking questions to ask and consider and provides simplified strategies and tips for success. Organized around the life cycle of a department chair, the book covers a wide range of topics, from entering the role and making sure you are in it for the right reasons to mentoring others so that you may leave a lasting legacy. From beginning to end, three major themes continuously surface: lead selflessly, lead courageously, and lead strategically.

From the start of the book, Jochum makes it clear that the role of a department chair is not for the faint of heart. He stresses the importance of understanding the selfless, servant nature of the position and the incredible impact daily choices have on the lives of everyone in the department and beyond. Based on my own experience, Jochum does a great job of providing a realistic preview of what the role entails, especially the parts that are sometimes overlooked and go unnoticed. He stresses that the role is not about you. Jochum argues that "people are your business," and this often requires a "focus shift" when transitioning from a tenure-track professorship to the leader of a team. He spotlights the need for chairs to lead with good heart and noble character. As Jochum also points out, part of leading with love is sometimes having to make bold and courageous decisions, such as asking tough questions, having difficult conversations, courageously managing crisis situations, and being willing to dive

headfirst into unknowns. Although courage and heart are key to effective leadership, Jochum shows through numerous examples that there is also a level of preparedness and strategy that is necessary, whether organizing your schedule and delegating work, listening to and learning from colleagues and other leaders, doing the homework for who you are choosing to hire, or mentoring others intentionally so that you can leave a lasting legacy. For Jochum, this is more than succession planning; it is also about actively holding space for student development.

A chapter I found to be particularly interesting and insightful was “The Importance of Hiring: Part I.” In the section titled “Fire before You Hire,” Jochum makes a compelling case for “firing” the wrong person before you hire them; in other words, it is better for you to leave a position unfilled and find ways to work around it than to fill the position with the wrong individual who could cause harm to the department. Regardless of the many pressures you may have to fill a position, Jochum persuasively argues that “it only takes one small drop of a toxic chemical or any undesirable element to ruin the entire environment for everyone.” Instead of making a risky or convenient hire in an effort to keep things running as close to normal as possible, Jochum dares chairs to instead strive for what will be the absolute best for the department in the long run, even if that means uncertainty, ambiguity, and change. This requires that leaders “be courageous and go after the best candidate” in hiring. Doing so may require creating your job description and candidate search around a “can’t get” candidate. He explains, “When identifying the ‘can’t get’ candidate, don’t fall into the trap of assuming they wouldn’t come to your university or, if they did, they wouldn’t stay long. It’s better to surround yourself with those who are good enough to go elsewhere, but because of the people and culture you’ve built, choose to be a part of your organization.” Although it may seem like the safest choice to hire a candidate with the best credentials, who checks off all the boxes and who is ready and willing to start, Jochum proves that waiting for the ideal “can’t get” candidate who has great character and cultural fit pays

off. Readers who are seasoned in search processes and hiring faculty will nod their heads in affirmation when reading this section. My own advice is that hiring should never be an either/or proposition; the right candidate will be both/and, demonstrating both position fit and cultural fit.

After an exciting roller-coaster ride, my kids will tell me they wish it had included one more drop, loop, or flip before ending. At the conclusion of Jochum’s book, I found myself wanting another drop or loop. To his credit, the author dedicated three chapters to department culture. He outlines the toxicities that could crush a department’s culture. He also gives a list of common types of effective organizational cultures and provides strategies for building a strong culture. The section on creating culture would have been a great opportunity to provide success stories of departments that were able to realistically build a strong culture either from the ground up, in a complete system reboot, or in working with what they had and tailoring it. I appreciated the times Jochum used scenarios to illustrate how to handle different types of conflict, along with other short examples, such as the chair who caused potential harm to the department and university due to sharing opinions outside of work. I would have loved to have seen something similar within the chapters on culture. Specifically, I hope in the next edition, Jochum will paint the picture of what healthy and vibrant departments look like through actual success stories.

While reading this book, and from my own experience as a department chair, I found myself thinking back on my pathway and decision-making process for becoming a chair. I scribbled notes, shared a few paragraphs with colleagues in need of a laugh or a wise word, and bookmarked the sections I know I’ll need to read again (and again). Altogether, this book is one to buy and keep. It’s great as a whole and worth reading cover to cover. You will certainly want to keep a copy on hand and use it as an excellent resource for managing situations most effectively as they arise. ▲

Reviewed by **Trey Guinn**, associate professor and chair of communication arts at University of the Incarnate Word. Email: tguinn@uiwtx.edu

## THE DEPARTMENT CHAIR

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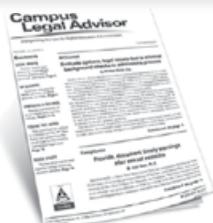
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