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# The Risks and Rewards of Serving as a Department Chair

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# The Risks and Rewards of Serving as a Department Chair

## **Abstract**

Serving as chair is a significant point in the career of any faculty member who inhabits the office. It is a position with high highs and low lows, significant stressors and some perks, the chance to have a positive impact on a program, and the near certainty that at some point you will generate disagreement with almost everyone in the department. The department chair is a boundary position between the university administration and the faculty; a chair inhabits both worlds, but resides fully in neither. Chairs are charged with numerous responsibilities and often lack full authority needed to accomplish their mission. In short, the department chair is a position unlike any other, and time spent in that role will not be soon forgotten. ...

Why would anyone want to be a department chair? There are many answers, but for me, it is the opportunity to make a positive impact on a larger scale than is possible as a non-administrative faculty member. If you have a concern for the common good, an insightful sense of vision, a love of making things better, and tenacity in pursuing those goals in the face of obstacle's, the chair's office offers a unique opportunity to contribute. Not only can you make the department better, but the work as chair also is central to the well-being of our discipline, as I'll explain later. This is important work that affects individuals at your institution and the community at large.

## **Disciplines**

Communication | Educational Leadership | Higher Education Administration | Organizational Communication | Speech and Rhetorical Studies

## **Comments**

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# THE RISKS AND REWARDS OF SERVING AS A DEPARTMENT CHAIR

*By Jon A. Hess*

**D**uring my interview as an external candidate for department chair at the University of Dayton, scheduling complications compressed my meeting with the provost to less than 10 minutes. The provost greeted me in a businesslike, yet friendly, manner, then fixed his stare on me and asked a single question: “Jon, I just want to know one thing. Why would you *want* to become a department chair?” And after a brief pause, he proceeded to offer his perspective on why he saw the chair as the most difficult position at the university. I have reflected on that conversation many times over my five years as chair, and while I have found the role meaningful and rewarding, his warnings about the position were not incorrect.

Serving as chair is a significant point in the career of any faculty member who inhabits the office. It is a position with high highs and low lows, significant stressors and some perks, the chance to have a positive impact on a program, and the near certainty that at some point you will generate disagreement with almost everyone in the department. The department chair is a boundary position between the university administration and the faculty; a chair inhabits both worlds, but resides fully in neither. Chairs are charged with numerous responsibilities and often lack full authority needed to accomplish their mission. In short, the department chair is a position unlike any other, and time spent in that role will not be soon forgotten.

Setting aside any negative perspectives implied in the provost’s inquiry, his question is one that demands to be answered. Too many people move into chair positions for the wrong reasons, and they and their departments pay a price. That isn’t to say that taking the job for the right reasons assures positive outcomes. Plenty of people go in for the right reasons only to discover that either they lack the ability to do the job well, or they do it well but it takes a significant toll on them. Fair warning: I have known far more chairs who yearned for the day they could return to their faculty role than those who loved their time as chair. But for individuals with the right motivation and abilities, the job of chair can be a satisfying experience.

Why would anyone want to be a department chair? There are many answers, but for me, it is the opportunity to make a positive impact on a larger scale than is possible as a non-administrative faculty member. If you have a concern for the common good, an insightful sense of vision, a love of making things better, and tenacity in pursuing those goals in the face of obstacles, the chair’s office offers a unique opportunity to contribute. Not only can you make the department better, but the work as chair also is central to the well-being of our discipline, as I’ll explain later. This is important work that affects individuals at your institution and the community at large.

What, then, are the wrong reasons to be chair? The biggest offender is narcissism. Too many

faculty seek leadership positions out of self-interest—to improve their self-image, to increase control, or to make financial gains. Anyone who goes into the chair's position for self-interest is likely to become cancerous to the department and its members. *Being a chair is not about you.* In fact, the opposite is true. As chair, you often need to set aside your interests because your concern is the department. Your success as a faculty member is measured by your teaching quality, publications and grants, and your service. But your success as a chair is measured by how well you make your department and its members better. While it is true that chairs need to make time to pursue their own interests (such as by maintaining their scholarship), that is not the metric by which their work as chair is assessed.

So, what can a person anticipate as a chair? First, don't expect to have the same control over your time and agenda as you had in a faculty role. Every day, chairs get dozens of e-mails and calls to tackle issues that arise. Some of these are exciting, such as opportunities for faculty or students. Others involve coordinating the department's work with the rest of the campus—getting information from outsiders to appropriate department members, and getting information from the department to the right outsiders. And much of it deals with solving problems of every sort. In that regard, the chair functions as the tonsils of a department. My limited understanding of anatomy is that tonsils' general role is to trap bacteria and other potentially threatening agents, allow the person to produce antibodies in defense. Every problem in the department that can't be satisfactorily handled by the individuals involved shows up in the chair's office, and it's up to the chair to resolve those problems so they don't become more threatening issues.

These day-to-day logistics are often frustrating for chairs because they can be so time-consuming that they drain time and cognitive resources chairs would prefer to devote to addressing foundational issues. More than a few chairs have complained, "I spend so much time bailing that I don't have a chance to steer the ship!" There is much truth to this. Chairs spend more time attending to details than leading with vision. Putting schedules together, dealing with facilities, resolving complaints, serving as a conduit for information, minding budgets, and managing other operations typically engulf large portions of a chair's time without offering the opportunity for transformative work.

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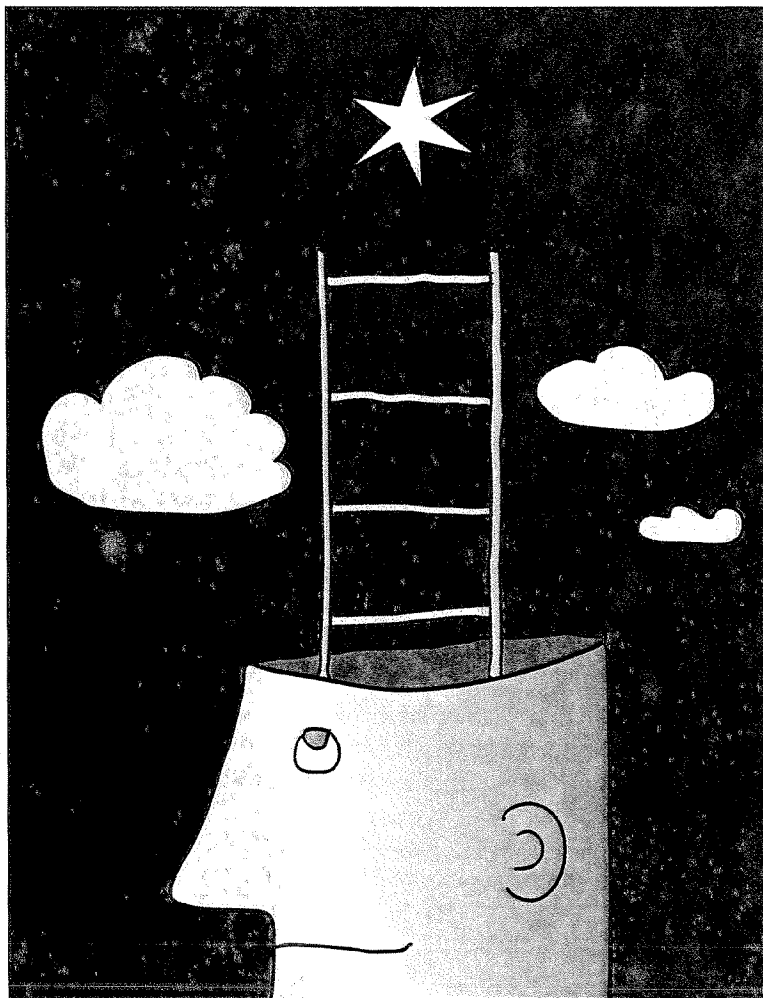
Fortunately, in some cases the response to small problems can offer a vehicle for addressing larger, important issues. For example: A student complains that she got bad advising. Does the department do anything to prepare faculty to advise well, or even know anything about the quality of advising within the department? Another student complains that a class didn't provide him with information he will need for his future. Does the program have clear and appropriate learning outcomes, and do the

required classes contribute to those outcomes in ways the instructors understand and follow? Addressing these issues and others like them can provide an opportunity to help shape the department in a meaningful manner. Even so, resolving day-to-day issues while still making time to show visionary leadership is a difficult challenge for all chairs.

While chairs in every discipline face common challenges, the chair of a communication department will face some issues specific to our field—and these matters are of no small importance. This is a pivotal time for the academy. Higher education is in the midst of what may turn out to be the greatest period of transformation in its modern history. Significant changes in our national economy, tuition costs that are becoming unaffordable for many Americans, dramatic cut-backs in state and federal support, the rise of online and hybrid delivery options, competition from for-profit institutions, a considerable increase in students beginning college with substantial AP or dual-credit course work, a sudden jump in international student enrollment, and sharply increased demands for evidence of student learning from the government and accreditation agencies are just some factors forcing colleges and universities to open almost every aspect of higher education to review.

In this landscape, no department can take its future for granted. Even departments in some of the more established disciplines, such as physics and philosophy, have been targeted for elimination in recent years. The risk of reduced support or elimination is even greater for less established disciplines like communication.

As perilous as these times are, they also hold unparalleled opportunity for communication departments, and chairs need to take advantage of that. The well-being of our discipline re-



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“Time spent as department chair often leads to self-reflection about career ambitions,” according to author Jon Hess.

sides in the strength of our scholarship and our individual departments. If we produce scholarship that is used and respected outside our discipline, and if every campus nationwide has a high quality and well-supported communication department, our discipline will flourish. If our scholarship is disrespected and departments lose resources or risk elimination, our discipline will face trouble. *Collectively, communication departments must rise to this challenge if we are to retain or enhance viability as a discipline.* Chairs can support quality of scholarship by discouraging research shortcuts, and supporting individuals’ grant-seeking and opportunities for scholarly development. They can make a difference for the department by helping to

strengthen quality of curriculum and attracting resource support.

Almost no one questions the importance of our discipline. Survey after survey shows that communication knowledge and skill (including specific domains such as interpersonal skills, group decision-making, leadership, and persuasion) are *the* top quality employers seek in new hires. Communication is often valued even above job-specific skills. This finding is robust across professions and over time. Departments need to take advantage of that and leverage it for resources. What people question is not our importance, but whether our scholarship, curriculum, and teaching meet those demands. In many cases, there is a mismatch between societal needs

and the content of our classes. For instance, are our public speaking classes teaching students how to choose a topic, a skill they are unlikely ever to use in public speaking, on the job or in civic engagement? Material like that could be replaced with topics that are important at that institution. Do departments even know what communication skills employers are seeking in new hires?

Extensive consultation at the University of Dayton showed that other departments didn’t need their students to learn about communication contexts (e.g., public speaking or interpersonal communication), as most departments structure their curricula. Rather, they needed transferable knowledge and skills that span contexts, such as persuasive advocacy, the ability to engage in collaborative dialogue, and the capacity to explain complex ideas to non-experts. Among other topics, employers saw a need for students to better understand how social media can be used more effectively in the organizational context, both for internal and external communication. Are our curricula built to support such needs? And does our scholarship offer sufficient guidance for the questions people are asking?

It is incumbent on communication departments to meet the needs of society by attending to how well our scholarship and curriculum are meeting these needs. Participants at the 2012 NCA Summer Chair’s Institute discussed—among other topics—the idea of using a department advisory board to foster better connections between the department (curriculum and extra-curricular elements) and the community it serves. This is but one idea that chairs might use to make the department stronger. Regardless of how it is done, the collective product of individual departments’ work will determine whether our discipline is strengthened or diminished in these changing times.

Earlier I noted that a person's time as chair will not be soon forgotten. In part that is a result of the nature of the work a chair does. But there are other reasons. Serving as chair causes permanent changes. Chairs gain a broader understanding of how the department and university work; that knowledge stays with them upon return to the faculty. Relationships with colleagues often change, and because decisions and actions from the time as chair are part of a relationship's history, many of those relationships are never quite the same after a return to the faculty. Furthermore, the time spent as a department chair often leads to self-reflection about career ambitions. For most, it brings a new appreciation of the positive elements of faculty

life. But for some, the work as a chair brings its own rewards and leads to aspirations of an administrative career path.

I once asked a dean I respected why he chose to move into that position. Among the more substantive elements of his response, he added, "I figured if nothing else, it would be an adventure." The same can be said of the role of chair. The department chair can be a turbulent boundary between faculty and administration. Looking back, some people will feel pride and accomplishment in their work as chair, while others will characterize their time with more frustration and regret. Almost all will see both rewards and struggles in their service. But whatever the outcome, time spent as chair certainly will be an adventure. ■



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research centers on relationship maintenance and instructional communication. His publications have appeared in *Human Communication Research*, *Personal Relationships*, *Journal of Applied Communication Research*, and *Communication Education*. Hess is a member of the NCA Chairs' Advisory Council. At UD, he has served as president of the Academic Senate and a member of the Dean's Executive Council. He previously served as basic course director and director of graduate studies at the University of Missouri.