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Do Your Job Better

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A Letter to a New Chair

By Bruce E. Davis

As the academic year closes, the reins of department chair will be passed to you. The position has been well recognized as the most difficult in academe, being neither fully a faculty nor administrative post, but typically the worst of both. It was certainly one of the most difficult and exasperating jobs I ever had.

However challenging your tour of duty, I'll bet that in a year you will look back and realize how much you have learned, and possibly changed, in that time. Here are a few thoughts and a bit of unsolicited advice, some of which is obvious and some of which I wish had been passed on to me ahead of time. Of course, everything is pretty much your decision in the end.

- It may take a full year for you to really understand the job, which is much more than paper management.
- The position carries much responsibility and too little commensurate authority. It has an ounce of cachet, none of the mythical eminence, and a ton of weight. There are high expectations from everyone, above and below you, to accomplish things big and small, but you will rarely have the authority to make convenient decisions. That may be your biggest challenge and a continuing headache.
- The chair's job primarily involves management; I'm not sure real "leadership" is possible. Most faculty members are engaged in their requisite responsibilities and have little, if any, room, time, or inclination for additional tasks or changes of direction. I don't recommend significant novelties from the chair, at least in the first year. Let the deans drive those things.
- You will catch way too much administrivia from above and will have to make decisions regarding how much of that information to share with

faculty. I perceived that one of my major responsibilities was to serve as a filter, sparing faculty members from the trivia so they could attend to their primary duties. That means many tasks will stop in your office, with you doing the work. Don't even try to move some of that load to faculty members; they will resist, understandably, for their own survival.

- The job is a time sink. It is supposed to take up only 50 percent of your time, but if you do everything requested, demanded, and necessary, there will be virtually no office time left for your own courses, research, or other fun faculty stuff. You'll have to take home some administrative tasks and probably most of your teaching and research work—unless you don't mind staying in the office or lab late into the evenings. Expect your research productivity to plummet.
- You will no longer have the same freedom of time. You will be expected to be in the office during normal work hours, with your discretionary time severely limited. You will miss the good old days as a faculty member, although your scheduling skills will surely improve. Manage your time rigorously; otherwise, like the Blob, the workload will engulf you, slowly but surely.
- Some special family arrangements may be necessary. Your nights, weekends, and holidays may not be as free as you would like. Get used to it. Although family and health should come first, it can be difficult to avoid having work take over your home life. Good time management was something I struggled with constantly.
- Most of the work you do as chair will be (and should be) out of sight of the faculty. You will receive no recognition or credit for many of your labors nor for most of your successes (see the next point). That is normal and not necessarily a bad thing. It's just the way it is.
- You will do 99 things correctly and one thing wrong. Guess which you will hear about from above and below. Be prepared.
- Stay in touch. As a faculty member, I always appreciated open communications and information from the chair. The faculty need to be informed. Perhaps a brief periodic e-mail will keep everyone up to date and help to avoid unpleasant surprises, as well as preventing your own isolation, real and perceived. However, be careful in the quantity of e-mail and information you send out. We academics are a fickle lot who have wildly varying tolerances between too much of something and too little. Either way, you are sure to hear about it.
- You will attend numerous meetings, some of which may even be useful. I encourage you to report anything of potential utility or interest to the

faculty. Professors may wish to be left alone, but they do not like surprises.

- Whatever your intended management style, I encourage inclusion of MBWA—management by walking around. That is a long-established, effective, and efficient means of staying in touch with the department in a personal way, both for giving and receiving information, requests, and suggestions. A few minutes spent in each faculty office periodically can be mutually beneficial.
- Your personal relationships with faculty and staff members may change a bit (not necessarily for the worse, just different). Because of your new position, some distance between colleagues and yourself will (and should) develop. That's normal. This isn't a "it's lonely at the top" warning (you won't be at the "top"), but you will be in a somewhat modified world. For example, you will make decisions now for the department at large, not based on personal relationships, and often without consultation with departmental colleagues. Typically you will need to keep your own counsel, or perhaps with other chairs and the dean, but you should consult friends in the ranks much less. To include a select few is to exclude the others; the consequences of doing so will be evident.
- Your most difficult task as chair is dealing with people. Much patience is required. You have to operate as a representative of the department and university, so you may not be able to express your own thoughts at times. Sometimes offering an instinctive personal comment will be useful, other times it will be dangerous. That will be something learned through trial and error.
- Now that you will have the inside scoop on personnel matters, you will be unable to share it with many people. When needed, get advice on the toughest problems from higher up in the administrative chain. Sometimes guidance from other chairs can be useful, providing that private information remains private. Remember that the departmental P&T committee is for evaluation, not for personnel management. Any leakage of private personnel information to faculty or friends who aren't directly involved in a case will damage your integrity and effectiveness, and sometimes worse.
- As a chair, you are an easy target for all kinds of complaints, grudges, and agendas. Prepare to catch flack and grumbling from all sides, even for things not in your purview or things not entirely your fault (from the very small, e.g., hall displays, to the very large, e.g., program development).

Whining is permitted, but it won't do you much good.

- A wise dean said that I, as the chairman, would be the fall guy, the villain, in any negative personnel matters. He emphasized, in one particularly sad termination case, "You won't look good in this regardless of what you do, so don't even try." Do your objective best, but expect criticism.
- For me, the department administrative assistant is more than a staff employee—he is a colleague. Treat those assistants as partners, and things will work rather well. They get things done, have plenty of initiative, have some insight into departmental workings, and will be an asset for you. Cut them some slack on the small stuff.
- Try to take all of your leave/vacation. You'll need it. It may not be entirely free time (unless you hide, in which case you'll catch double trouble upon emerging).
- When student complaints come to your attention, especially when presented to you in person, your initial position should be neutral. Don't take sides. Take complaints seriously, but don't immediately assume an instructor's guilt or innocence. High diplomacy is needed. Investigate and document what happened as best you can. Usually, my first question to students is to ask if they have talked to the instructor first. Complete the process thoroughly (particularly the documentation) before making decisions and taking action.
- It's difficult to say "no" to your colleagues. It will be accepted more respectfully if stated nicely. Some chairs can be overly autocratic, which seems counterproductive.
- Compartmentalize issues as much as possible. To ensure fairness and objectivity in matters, it is best to keep some events separate. If you are angry with someone about Issue A, don't let that carry over to Issue B unless the two are related. This helps your sanity as well.
- I quickly learned that effective communications are difficult to master but are the most important component of your success, and the department's. Sometimes the message you intended to send is not the one that is received. Listen to the heart and from the heart. The mouth often mangles what the heart wants to say.
- Try to keep an open mind. Confidence in your views is useful, but certitude in this job is not a strength; it can be detrimental to your success.
- Don't forget that you were, and still are, a faculty member. For balance, try to view your actions and decisions from that perspective.
- Be a proactive "agent" and representative for the department's progress

and opportunities. Watch all events, politics, rumors, and meetings as they relate to the department (positive and negative). Speak up for your faculty. Some chairs are too timid in protecting and advancing their department.

- Try to have fun in this position. Despite all I've said here, it can be satisfying to achieve something for your department and the university. The job is worthwhile. Just keep a good sense of humor and stay optimistic. Keep smiling. Otherwise, you can be suckered into the Dark Side. Stay on the Bright Side and enjoy life as intended.

Call on me any time.

Bruce E. Davis is a former professor at Eastern Kentucky University who stepped down as chair of the department of geography and geology in 2004 and retired in 2011. He originally sent a version of this essay to his successor as chair in 2004.