



1-1-1989

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#### Recommended Citation

Norton, M. Scott (1989) "The Academic Department Chair in Educational Administration," *Educational Considerations*: Vol. 16: No. 1. <https://doi.org/10.4148/0146-9282.1576>

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What are the characteristics that make the departmental chair in educational administration attractive to some and less desirable to others?

# The Academic Department Chair in Educational Administration

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## Introduction

In view of the fact that department chairs constitute the largest single group of administrators in institutions of higher education, it is perplexing that this role has received such limited study and analysis by researchers. Not only is there limited literature in the field relating to the work of the academic department chair, but there appears to be no rising interest in investigating the position despite certain evidences of erosion in this administrative role.

In a study by Waltzer of the role of chair at Miami University, it was noted that:

... more than half of the present chairmen state unequivocally that they will not consider another term in the job. Adding those who respond, "yes, I would consider another term if . . ." but attach a host of qualifications, and those who are seeking higher administrative positions, fewer than one-third of the chairmen remain open-minded about considering another term in the job.<sup>1</sup>

A study by Norton in 1977 revealed similar findings concerning willingness to continue service as chair. Of 106 chairs appointed from within the department to the position, 43.4 percent stated that they would be willing to continue in the position, while 27.4 percent stated an unwillingness to do so. Nearly 30 percent indicated that they would do so only on certain conditions.<sup>2</sup>

The Report of the National Commission on Excellence in Educational Administration recently emphasized the need to reexamine the position of department chair. As indicated by the Commission, "Too often, program leadership is regarded as temporary and a duty rather than as a challenge. This should change immediately . . . Scholars who reluctantly serve as chairpersons are unlikely to create an exciting setting. Program chairs should be committed to constantly improving programs . . ."<sup>3</sup>

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## The Study

In an attempt to find answers to the foregoing concerns and also to gain further insight into the role of the academic department chair in educational administration from a national perspective, a comprehensive study of the position was initiated in the spring of 1987. The study included 45 chairs in University Council for Educational Administration (UCEA) member institutions and 42 from non-member institutions. Six major study areas were emphasized that included departmental organization, position responsibilities, satisfactions/dissatisfactions of the chair role, and related factors that tend to inhibit/enhance the attractiveness of the position.

## Conditions and Trends

Data gathered provided information that served to identify several conditions and/or trends related to the position of chair. These considerations revealed important changes occurring in the role and also described the environment in which the department chair presently is operating.

## Departmental Organization

It is apparent that departments of educational administration are changing both in structure and program relationships. Various forms of department reorganization have resulted in mergers of programs of educational administration with a wide variety of other program thrusts. Sixteen of 45 UCEA member departments and 13 of 42 non-member departments had been involved in some form of reorganization within the last *three* years. Of the total departments participating, only 40 percent reported that their faculty membership consisted exclusively of individuals in educational administration. In UCEA departments alone, 63 instructional areas other than administration were reported. Among the program components being housed with educational administration were Higher Education (most common), Adult Education, Counselor Education, Educational Psychology, Media, Multi-Cultural Education, Philosophy of Education, Special Education, Urban Education, and Vocational-Technical Education. Program components reported by non-UCEA departments were similar, but included such different thrusts as Recreation, Religious Education, Teacher Evaluation, Health Education, and Indian Education.

The diversification of organization in departments of educational administration is revealed also by department titles. Although the titles of departments were similar, 31 of 45 UCEA department titles differed. Such titles as Department of Administration; Training and Policy Studies; Educational Leadership and Cultural Studies; Educational Theory, Policy, and Administration; and Administration and Foundational Services were reported. The official titles of department/program chairs varied as well. Common titles for chairs were chairman, chairperson, and chairwoman; however, such titles as chief professor, coordinator, department head, and program chair were reported as well.

Departments generally were organized as graduate departments only, although a substantial number of UCEA departments offered some undergraduate course work as well (31%). Only two of the 45 UCEA departments reported that they were considered as both a graduate and undergraduate department while nine non-member departments had both program levels.

Departments of educational administration varied in number of faculty from five members or less to over 26 F.T.E. The most common F.T.E. for both UCEA and non-member

departments was 6-10 faculty members, although 22 departments reported having 11-15 faculty personnel.

While it is clear that faculty in programs of educational administration are being housed with faculty in many different program areas, the specific nature of the relationships between and among these areas, as well as the "cross-overs" among these programs is not clear. It is not known, for example, if mergers taking place are based on programmatic rationale or on other reasons more related to decreasing resources or personal views of central administrative officials.

### Stability of the Position

The study examined such factors as time in the position of chair, whether chairs were selected from inside the department, age of chairs when assuming the role, intentions to accept another term, and related job factors. Over 51 percent of the chairs in UCEA departments were in their first three years of service in the role. Nearly 63 percent of non-member chairs were in their first three years in the position. A study of chairs completed ten years earlier revealed that 20 percent were in their first three years of service as chair.<sup>4</sup> This figure is substantially lower than the 51 percent and 63 percent reported for UCEA member and non-member departments in 1987.

The practice of selecting a chair from members of the present department faculty was common to both UCEA member and non-member institutions. For example, only 11 of 45 UCEA chairs were not serving as members of the department when selected for the position. In all, only seven chairs were serving outside the department and at a different institution when selected as chair.

There is some evidence that individuals are assuming the position of chair at a later age than previously. The mode for assuming the present position of chair was 51-55 years in UCEA departments and 46-50 in non-UCEA departments. Overall, 61.4 percent of UCEA chairs were 46 years of age or more when they became chair. The approximate mean age for UCEA chairs at the time they assumed the role was 49.18 years. In the 1977 study of college department chairs mentioned previously, the individual was between 41-45 years of age when appointed to the position. The mean age of chairs ten years ago when appointed to the role was 42 years.<sup>5</sup>

Of the UCEA chairs who had specific terms of office such as 3 years, only 31 percent stated that they would accept another term while another 45 percent reported that they would do so only on certain conditions. These conditions varied widely but included such comments as "would not do so until I'm tenured," "not unless time for research was programmed," "only with an increase in salary," and "not unless there was a decrease in the clerical demands of the position."

It was of interest to note that only slightly more than one-half of the UCEA chairs received a salary differential for serving were in the position. Further, stipends were surprisingly low with stipends of \$1,000-\$3,000 being most common.

Another important factor relating to the stability of the chair position is its relationships with the office of the dean. Nearly half of the non-member chairs stated that communication between their office and the dean was "satisfactory, but in need of improvement." Nearly one-third of the UCEA chairs viewed communication between them and the dean as "in need of improvement."

Over one-fourth of the chairs reported a considerable disparity between position responsibility and position authority. Only 16 percent of the UCEA chairs and 20 percent

of the non-member chairs perceived a high correlation between the position responsibilities and their authority to fulfill them.

### The Job of Department Chair

Chairs of educational administration are witnessing an expansion in the number and range of position responsibilities even though there is a definite trend toward more centralized decision making within colleges and universities. Nearly two-thirds of the participating chairs reported some or much change toward centralization. Additionally, over 70 percent perceived a change toward more bureaucracy vs. more informal relationships within their institutions.

Expansion in position responsibilities was reported in virtually all areas, however, increases in the numbers of activities and deadlines required, reports and related paperwork being handled, and the increases required in the area of external communication with various groups were those especially noted by the chairs. Various administrative responsibilities were assigned actual time allocations by chairs in the study. For example, 20-30 percent of the chair's time in UCEA programs was spent in the area of department affairs (planning, policies, conducting meetings, internal communications, etc.) with 5-10 percent given to academic affairs and 10-15 percent to student affairs. Further, chairs apparently would not ideally alter these time allocations a great deal.

Chairs generally were "released" one-half time for their administrative duties, although one-fourth time also was a common time allocation. Five UCEA chairs and two non-UCEA chairs reported that they were "full-time" in the chair's role. Thirty UCEA chairs reported that their term was for a specific time. The most common term was three years (12 chairs) with one year (6 chairs), four years (5 chairs) and five years (5 chairs) also receiving several responses. Chairs in non-UCEA positions typically were selected for a three-year term.

Overall, chairs rated rather highly their ability to manage the position. On a scale of 1 low and 5 high, UCEA chairs had a mean of 3.64 and non-member chairs a mean of 3.78 concerning manageability of the position. Furthermore, the chairs' assessments of their ability to meet such responsibilities as goal achievement, planning for improvement, developing programs, and others generally had means of 3.4 or higher on a 5-point scale.

Chairs were somewhat divided, however, on the importance and viability of the position. When asked if they viewed the role as "the heart of the academic enterprise" or as "the bottom rung in the downward delegation of managerial, clerical, and other such tasks," approximately 58 percent agreed that the position was "the heart of the enterprise" while 42 percent viewed the role as "the bottom rung."

Participants also expressed their opinions concerning changes in the status/prestige of the chair's position over the last several years. These views were as follows:

Status of Chair's Position	UCEA	Non-UCEA
Increase in status/prestige	31.1%	30.0%
Decrease in status/prestige	22.2%	12.5%
Retained somewhat of a status quo	46.7%	52.5%
Unable to judge	0.0%	5.0%

Nevertheless, the large majority of chairs was of the opinion that their role provided them some opportunity for input into policy development at the college level and that such input was indeed influential in shaping the final results.

### Related Rewards, Satisfaction, and Dissatisfactions

Various efforts were made to gain chairs' perceptions of job enjoyment and satisfaction. Responses were mixed. For example, when asked to assess their satisfaction in the role, UCEA chairs had a mean of 3.16 and non-member chairs a mean of 3.49 on a 5-point scale. However, when asked to assess the attractiveness of the position, means of 2.86 and 3.03 resulted.

Many different program components served to bring some degree of reward and satisfaction to the role. Positive student development and performance, for example, was viewed as resulting in a high degree or some degree of satisfaction for nearly all chairs. Faculty development and achievement, program development, and general department achievement also were underlined as having potential for high levels of job satisfaction. Rewards also were associated closely with opportunities to serve one's colleagues, to leave one's mark on the department, to have the opportunity to get something done and to gain the feeling of a job well done.

Department chairs were especially concerned about the toll the position takes on one's scholarly production. A large number (42.2%) reported a reduction in scholarly production since assuming the position. This concern for personal scholarly production was a primary deterrent to overall job satisfaction for most chairs.

Other factors that tend to pose difficulties and/or cause frustration for chairs included: (1) inadequacies of department resources including budget and personnel, (2) record-keeping and reporting requirements, (3) requirements calling for the justification of requests, resources, and programs, and (4) job overload. There were many others named by chairs, of course.

Those factors considered by chairs as highly significant to the position's *attractiveness* included several factors that also were identified with job satisfaction. Specific factors that tended to enhance the position's attractiveness included: (1) support from the faculty with regard to general decision making and policy development, (2) support from the faculty regarding program development, (3) having responsibilities matched with resources to fulfill them and, (4) assuring the chairs involvement in those decisions that require transmitting, interpreting, defending, and implementing.

What would lead chairs toward resignation? Several considerations such as continuing decrease in scholarly production were noted previously. However, it is clear that support from the office of the dean is an essential element for enhancing continuity in the position. Twenty-eight of 45 UCEA chairs and 24 of 42 non-UCEA chairs reported that they would resign if non-support from the dean's office became prominent. Support from the dean and support from the department faculty led all other considerations in regard to those conditions (should they deteriorate to an unsatisfactory level) that would lead chairs to step down from their positions.

### Summary Discussion

The study data provided insight into several conditions being encountered by academic department chairs in educational administration. It is clear that programs of educational administration increasingly are being housed with a variety of different program areas. This study did not at-

tempt to ascertain the rationale behind the reorganization that is taking place. What is clear however, is the fact that new faculty and program relationships are resulting from such arrangements. Not only are faculty and program relationship influenced through various reorganization arrangements, but the allocation of program resources and levels of administrative authority are altered as well. In many instances, for example, such matters as budget development/control and faculty compensation recommendations are being removed from the jurisdiction of the academic department chair. New levels of administration often are being placed between the chair and the office of the dean. Communication between the chairs of the department of educational administration and the dean's office was viewed by participating chairs in the study as in need of improvement. It would appear that the placing of additional layers of administration between the chair and dean does little to improve communication. In addition, the trend toward the centralization of decision making tends to remove further the department chair's personal involvement in decisions that ultimately must be implemented at the department level.

Another consideration of primary concern centers on the fact that there is an increasing instability in the position of chair in many institutions. This condition is revealed in part by the increasing turnover in the position of chair. An apparent trend is for chairs to serve for one specified term only and then return to the professorship. It is highly questionable that one-term chairs can provide the leadership necessary for the level of program development and renewal needed for a quality program in educational administration. Such temporary duty tends to discourage innovative, long-range program planning and implementation. In addition, an increasing number of chairs is accepting the position on the rationale that it was "their turn to serve." Such reluctance to accept this administrative role certainly is not conducive to the dynamic leadership required.

Study data provided useful information relating to improving the attractiveness of the position of chair. The toll that is taken on one's scholarly activities is an example of a condition that must be resolved if quality personnel are to be attracted to the role. Such factors as adequate department resources, adequate secretarial services, a reduction of reporting requirements and general job overload are additional examples of conditions needing the study and resolution of all parties concerned. A consideration often underestimated in importance for attracting and retaining quality chairs is that of compensation. At present, salary differentials do little to encourage highly qualified individuals to accept the role of chair. Chairs in the study were of the opinion that a stipend of \$5,000 or 10 percent of the base salary figure was an equitable remuneration for such service. Few chairs are remunerated at this level presently.

A final area of concern centers on the apparent diminishing authority of the chair's position in many institutions. A basic principle of administration is that authority should be commensurate with assigned responsibilities. Few chairs in the study reported a high correlation between position responsibilities and their authority. Study data gave some support to the trend of centralizing decisions of high importance and the assigning of additional clerical type activities to chairs. Such a practice provides little incentive for attracting individuals interested only in assuming challenging leadership roles and results in an unattractive perception of the position on the part of highly capable leaders. The need is to create a job setting that provides challenging

leadership opportunities along with appropriate accountability.

In view of the foregoing discussion, and the findings of this recent study, it is apparent that the role of department chair is being diminished in some institutions. If certain conditions continue to deteriorate, the position of department chair could be more seriously eroded. This matter requires the unrelenting concern of both professional organizations and institutions of higher education. The leadership function of the academic department chair must become a primary concern of cooperative study groups, professional conferences, task force groups, and other professional organizations that serve to study priority problems and provide directions that serve to assure dynamic leadership for all programs of administrator preparation.

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