

Kansas State University Libraries

## New Prairie Press

---

Academic Chairpersons Conference  
Proceedings

37th Academic Chairpersons Conference,  
Savannah, GA

---

### Master Sergeant, Pusher, Midwife, or the Department Chair

Randall Bowden

*Tarleton State University*, [rbowden@tarleton.edu](mailto:rbowden@tarleton.edu)

Jesse Brock

*Tarleton State University*, [sw\\_jbrock@tarleton.edu](mailto:sw_jbrock@tarleton.edu)

Phillis Bunch

*Tarleton State University*, [sw\\_bunch@tarleton.edu](mailto:sw_bunch@tarleton.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: <https://newprairiepress.org/accp>



Part of the [Educational Leadership Commons](#), and the [Higher Education Administration Commons](#)



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 4.0 License](#).

---

#### Recommended Citation

Bowden, Randall; Brock, Jesse; and Bunch, Phillis (2020). "Master Sergeant, Pusher, Midwife, or the Department Chair," *Academic Chairpersons Conference Proceedings*. <https://newprairiepress.org/accp/2020/operations/4>

This Event is brought to you for free and open access by the Conferences at New Prairie Press. It has been accepted for inclusion in Academic Chairpersons Conference Proceedings by an authorized administrator of New Prairie Press. For more information, please contact [cads@k-state.edu](mailto:cads@k-state.edu).

- 1) Presentation Title: Master Sergeant, Pusher, Midwife, or the Department Chair
- 2) Presenter Information:

Randall Bowden

Randall Bowden is a Professor of Education and Chair of the Department of Higher Education Leadership & Technology at Tarleton State University. Prior to TSU, he was an Associate Professor of Educational Leadership-Higher Education Administration at Texas A&M University Corpus Christi, and was also the co-founder and consulting editor of the *Journal of Hispanic Higher Education*. Dr. Bowden earned his MA from the University of Colorado and his PhD in Higher Education Administration from the University of Denver.

Jesse Brock

Jesse Brock is a Doctoral Research Fellow within the Educational Leadership & Technology Department at Tarleton State University (TSU). He is currently earning a doctorate of education with a concentration in Higher Education Administration. Prior to TSU, Brock was a graduate teaching fellow at the University of Alabama. He earned a BA in History from Young Harris College, a MA in History from the University of North Alabama, and a MA in American Studies from the University of Alabama. His research interests are sport in higher education and the history of higher education.

Phillis Bunch

Phillis Bunch is a Doctoral Research Fellow within the Educational Leadership & Technology Department at Tarleton State University (TSU). She is currently earning a doctorate of education with a concentration in Higher Education Administration. Prior to TSU, Bunch was a music educator in both the Aledo Independent School District and the Burkburnett Independent School District. She earned a BA in Music and K-12 Texas Music Educators Certification from Midwestern State University and a Master of Music Education from Tarleton State University. Her research interests are institutional recruiting and retention as well as undergraduate student success through participation in fine arts.

- 3) Disciplines: Educational Leadership; Higher Education Administration
- 4) Presentation Theme: Operating the Department or Issues and Trends in Higher Education
- 5) Presentation Type: Brown Bag Lunch Discussion

- 6) Abstract: Six decades of literature were examined to get a sense of the role of the academic chair. Three things emerge. Roles: (a) vary widely; (b) change drastically; (c) are culturally influenced. This session discusses the role's development from the influence of societal changes more than duties assigned by administrators.
- 7) Keywords: Academic leadership, Department Chair, Roles & Responsibilities, Organizational Culture, Social trends, External factors
- 8) Creative Commons License:
- 9) Presentation Documents: Description of Discussion Session

*Housemother. Queen bee. Midwife. Master Sergeant. Academic String Pusher. Custodian of Academic Integrity. Cultural rainmaker. A life guard without a life jacket.* What do those concepts have in common? Each has been used by scholars over the past half century to characterize the chair position. However, it is uncertain as to what the role of a chair is, although scholars have examined it through the years (Berdrow, 2010; Creswell, Wheeler, Seagren, Egly, & Beyer, 1990; Falk, 1979; Watson, 1986). Gmelch and Miskin (2010) referred to one report characterizing chairs being responsible for 97 activities. They cited another report where chairs are responsible for 54 different tasks, while another report had as few as 12 functions. Wald and Golding (2019) noted that the chair's responsibilities range "from student affairs and staff wellbeing and productivity, to department governance and finances, and to representing the department to institution's wider administration and leadership" (p. 2). Nevertheless, that range encompasses a large spectrum of duties, roles, and responsibilities to where there is little to no agreement on what specifically is the job of an academic chair. Across decades of literature, there is one thing constant, though, while there were shared tasks, external factors, such as social movements, economics, politics, and technological advances played a major role in emphasis realignment, expectations of success, and even the emergence of new roles and responsibilities. One prevailing notion is that the chair is responsible for shaping organizational culture, including departmental vision, mission, and outcomes (Bystydzienski, Thomas, Howe, & Desai, 2017).

We suggest that much of the role of the chair is shaped by historical developments impacting higher education. Thelin (2019) claimed that colleges and universities are "historical institutions" (p. xxv) that are constantly changing. This historical framework has yet to be applied to study the transformation and advancements of the chair position. While scholars have conducted research on chair duties, a dearth of scholarship exists on the examination of how external factors alter and shape the role of chairs.

The literature attempts to prescribe a set number of duties and best practices to the position. We argue that these efforts, while noble and rigorous, are limited as the roles and responsibilities of the chair are framed by external and cultural factors unique to each institution, and even each department. The duties of the chair position are largely shaped by the cultural milieu of which the organization/department operates. For this discussion, we invite chairs to consider influencers that shape their approach to their roles and responsibilities. Furthermore, we will ask participants to discuss contemporary or foreseeable external factors that will potentially impact the chair position in the near future. To frame and contextualize this discussion, we will briefly

present information from a review of research examining the role of chairs, highlighting how societal movements, such as unionism, economic reform, and technological advances have impacted the department head position, as well as key concepts from institutional/organizational theory. Expected participants will vary based on academic discipline, geography, institutional size, and even institutional mission. The presenters expect for the conversation to reveal that while participating chairs share several management and leadership responsibilities (i.e., what), the why and how behind their duties differ due to their situational individuality.

## References

- Berdrow, I. (2010). King among kings: Understanding the role and responsibilities of the department chair in higher education. *Educational Management Administration & Leadership*, 38(4), 499-514. doi:10.1177/1741143210368146
- Blyn, M., & Zoerner, C. (1982). The academic string pushers: The origins of the upcoming crisis in the management of academia. *Change*, 14(2), 21-60. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org/zeus.tarleton.edu:82/stable/40163841>
- Bystydzienski, J., Thomas, N., Howe, S., & Desai, A. (2017). The leadership role of college deans and department chairs in academic change. *Studies in Higher Education*, 42(12), 2301-2315. doi:10.1080/03075079.2016.1152464
- Creswell, J. W., Wheeler, D. W., Seagan, A. T., Egly, N. J., & Beyer, K. D. (1990). *The academic chairperson's handbook*. Lincoln, N.E.: University of Nebraska Press.
- Falk, G. (1979). The academic department chairmanship and role conflict. *Improving College and University Teaching*, 27(2), 79-86. Retrieved from <https://www.jstor.org/stable/27565294>
- Gmelch, W. H., & Miskin, V. D. (2010). *Department chair: Leadership skills* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). Madison, WI: Atwood Publishing.
- Thelin, J. R. (2019). *A history of American higher education* (3rd ed.). Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Wald, N., & Golding, C. (2019). Why be a head of department? Exploring the positive aspects and benefits. *Studies in Higher Education*, 1-11. doi: 10.1080/03075079.2019.1578736

Watson, R. E. L. (1986). The role of the department chair: A replication and extension. *The Canadian Journal of Higher Education*, XVI(1), 13-23. Retrieved from <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ338979.pdf>