

# The Call for Leadership: Why Chairs Serve, What They Do, and How Long Should They Serve<sup>1</sup>

Walt Gmelch

University of San Francisco

The time of “amateur administration”—where professors play musical chairs, stepping occasionally into the role of department chair—is over. Too much is at stake in this era of change and challenge to let leadership be left to chance or taking turns. The department chair position is the most critical role in the university, and the most unique management position in America. Consider the facts: 80% of university decisions are made at the department level (Carroll and Wolverton 2004); of the 80,000 chairs in America, one in five turn over every year; and while it takes 10,000 hours of practice to reach competence (projected as eight years for chairs and already established as seven years for faculty to get tenure) (Thomas and Schuh 2004), only 3% of chairs receive training in leadership (Gmelch et al. 2002). This article addresses the why, what, and how of the leadership call. In essence, it attempts to answer four basic questions: (1) Why become a department chair? (2) How can you become an effective chair? (3) What do department chairs do? (4) How long is long enough to serve?

## The Call for Leadership

Today the development of leaders in our society is at a critical junction – too important to leave to chance. The corporate world complains of simply progressing from the Bronze Age of leadership development to the Iron Age (Conger & Benjamin, 1999). If this is true, I fear colleges and universities may still be in the Dark Ages. It is my hope that this article will at least help illuminate the way for some faculty to enter the Building Age of academic department leadership.

The preparation of academic leaders takes time, training, commitment, and expertise. Since academics first receive their training in research and teaching, they scarcely anticipate serving as a department chair. How many professors woke up one day in the 3<sup>rd</sup> grade and said, “I want to be a department chair”? Professors become chairs with only minimal preparation and management training (Hecht 2004). Even professors who become department chairs spend, on the average, 16 years in their discipline before venturing into academic leadership (Carroll, 1991). We reward our new Ph.Ds. for becoming internationally renowned experts in narrow fields, not generalists who could serve in a leadership capacity.

One of the most glaring shortcomings in the leadership area is the scarcity of sound research on the training and development of leaders (Conger and Benjamin 1999; Gmelch & Buller, 2015). The academic leader is among the least studied and most misunderstood management position in the United States. Since being a chair isn't

on many faculty's initial professional career plan, or even on their radar screen, let's explore what we know about the chair position. From research, anecdotal writings, and 30 years serving in administrative roles at public and private universities, let me share some *Truisms of Department Leadership*.

1. *Department chairs hold the most important position in the university.* Who advances the discipline? Who teaches students? Who produces graduates? Who serves the professional community? Clearly the answer is the department, guided by the *department chair*. In many ways, the university structure should be turned upside down. Deans need to serve their department chairs as they serve faculty and students.
2. *Deans are only as good as their department chairs.* An astute provost once uttered this statement and as a dean for almost two decades I can attest that my colleges were only as good as the chairs who led productive departments.
3. *Eighty percent of university decisions are made at the department level.* Department chairs are at the helm to advance their departments and the college. They make the decisions day in and day out -- making a difference in the lives of students and the advancement of their disciplines.
4. *The department chair position is the most unique management position in America.* Do department chairs still teach, advise students, and engage in scholarship? Yes, of course as virtually all department chairs still teach. Ninety-six percent of the chairs perceive themselves as faculty, or faculty-administrators, and only 4 percent as administrators. Where in the corporate world do managers take their previous jobs to their new ones?
5. *Only 3% of department chairs receive training.* In 1996, a study of two thousand academic leaders, only 3% reported that they had any systematic leadership development (Gmelch, Wolverton, Wolverton, & Hermanson, 1996). Not much has changed in a couple of decades as in 2013 only 3.3% of department chairs came to their positions with preparation in the skills they need (Cipriano & Riccardi, 2013). “To put it bluntly, academic

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Walt Gmelch (whgmelch@usfca.edu) is a professor of Leadership Studies and former dean at the University of San Francisco, San Francisco, CA. <sup>1</sup>This article emerges from three decades of research, publications, and reflections as a sitting dean, folding chair, and now a recovering dean -- as I return to my roots as a faculty member and academic colleague. I dedicate this manuscript to the most effective academic leader I have had the pleasure to work with as a trusted academic colleague, friend, and confidant: Dean Jerry Thomas, University of North Texas and former Chair of Kinesiology at Iowa State University.

leadership is one of the few professions one can enter today with absolutely no training in, credentials for, or knowledge about the central duties of the position” (Gmelch & Buller, 2015, p. 2).

6. *The time of amateur administration is over.* This is not a time for professors to play musical chairs, stepping occasionally into the role of department chair. Too much is at stake in this time of change and challenge to let your department’s leadership be left to chance or taking turns. The future of universities and colleges depends on answering the call to department leadership with commitment and vision.

## Obstacles to the Call for Academic Leadership

Why do some professors choose to lead and others not? What conditions do we create in universities that act as barriers to attracting faculty to serve as department chairs?

**Snuff Out the Spark Before the Leadership Flame is Ignited.** First, we have ourselves to blame. If a spark of enthusiasm for leadership is ignited in any young faculty, the institutional system may well snuff it out (Gardner, 1987). Far from encouraging faculty, we hold the needs for experts and professionals higher than that of leaders. In fact, many academics prefer an institution in which there were no leaders, only experts. Far from wishing to be leaders, they may conclude that they do not even wish to associate with one. We fail to cultivate leadership talent in junior faculty.

**Exalt the Prestige and Prowess of the Professional Expert.** Some academics may possess the requisite skills and leadership ability but chose not to respond to the call for leadership (Boyatzis, 1990). Instead, they follow a path of teaching and scholarship and choose not to serve in leadership roles. In addition, from graduate school days, academics are socialized to drive down the road to specialization.

Academic leaders must be generalists. “Tomorrow’s leaders will very likely have begun life as trained specialists, but to mature as leaders they must sooner or later climb out of the trenches of specialization and rise above the boundaries that separate the various segments of society” (Gardner, 1987, p. 7). Department chairs must be generalists to cope with the diversity of problems and multitude of constituencies. They must look at their departments with a broader vision and more systemic point of view.

**Ignore the Rigors of Public and Personal Life.** Academics typically join the academy in search of a professional life characterized by autonomy and independence. During their tenure as professors they observe the stormy years of chairs and scathing criticisms of academic administrators in general – chairs, deans, provosts and presidents -- and wonder, “Why would I want to subject myself to such scrutiny and public criticism?” We cannot ensure a decent amount of personal privacy for chairs since they are public servant leaders every moment of the day, with every appointment, message, and memo open to public scrutiny, critique, comment and review. Even at home, academics find that leadership is not a “family-friendly” profession. Thus, most academics are not willing to give up their professional and personal lives for one of servant leadership.

**A Precarious State of Executive Selection.** Experts contend that the state of selection of the top three levels of the organization is precarious at best (Sessa and Taylor 2000). In higher education that typically includes presidents, provosts, and deans, although

one might even question the state of selecting department chairs. Why? First, universities and colleges have very little expertise in the selection of leaders, and at times leave that process to happenstance or executive search firms. Second, executives themselves do not feel particularly competent in the skills needed in selection, and gravitate instead to pressing, day-to-day needs. Finally, most institutions of higher education have inadequate hiring, training, promotional, and succession-planning systems. Symbolically, new administrators are “given the gavel” one day as their predecessor leaves the next. Instead, universities should practice “passing the baton” -- mentoring the new administrator months before taking office and coaching them into their new responsibilities and roles.

To recount these obstacles is not an attempt to deafen the call to leadership, but rather to call attention to the obstacles that must be overcome in order to develop the next generation of department chairs. What strategies can be used to hurdle the obstacles of the reluctant leader – to ignite the flame of servant leadership; to exalt the need for generalists as leaders; and to address the strains on public and personal life. Given these conditions, how do we send a call out to awaken the latent leaders in the academy? How do we make some academics aware of their leadership potential? How do we make leadership feasible, tolerable, and inviting for academics?

Now, let’s sharpen the focus of this article to the why, what, and how of the call for leadership; the four questions you might be asking: (1) Why become a department chair? (2) How can you “build” an effective chair? (3) What do department chairs do? and (4) How long is long enough to serve?

## Why Be a Department Chair?

Given the barriers, complications, and ambiguities of the chair position, why do faculty choose to serve? What are the real motives faculty have for accepting the position, and does their motivation affect their willingness to be a leader? As you examine your own motives, consider the top eight reasons chairs chose to serve (Gmelch & Miskin, 2011):

1. For personal development (interesting, challenge, new opportunities)
2. To advance my department (take it to the next level, from “good to great”)
3. Drafted by the dean or my colleagues
4. Out of necessity (lack of alternative candidates)
5. To be more in control of my environment
6. Out of a sense of duty, it was my turn
7. For financial gain
8. An opportunity to relocate at a new institution

Review this list (with an apology for listing as it is becoming an administrative pathology!). What are your top three motivations to serve? As you mature in your position your motives may change. But for now, take stock of your top choices as it may have an impact on your longevity and legacy.

## Extrinsic Motivation

Some chairs chose to serve for *extrinsic* reasons: either their deans or colleagues convinced them to take the job (many times reluctantly), or they felt forced to take it because no one else was willing or able, or they didn’t want someone else to do it. One chair commented

he was “scared to death of the alternative!” Typical extrinsically motivated faculty indicated that they were requested to, told to, or approached by the dean with no alternative choice.

### Intrinsic Motivation

In contrast, many chairs sought the position for *intrinsic* reasons: they saw it as an opportunity to help either the department or themselves. Those who expressed the altruistic need to help the department stated that they “desired to help other faculty members,” “wanted to build a strong academic department,” or “needed to help develop a new program in the department.” Others, more personally motivated sought the chair position because the “needed a challenge,” “wanted experience in administration,” or simply “wanted to be in more control of their environment.”

Does the initial motivation affect the chair’s ability or willingness to serve? In a national survey, eight hundred chairs answered the following two questions: (1) What was your motivation to serve?

and (2) Are you willing to serve more than one term? The results indicated that of those who served for extrinsic reasons, only 25% were willing to serve a second term. However, those serving for intrinsic interests, 75% of the chairs were willing to serve again. These results demonstrate that by a three-to-one margin, those most willing to continue in the chair position had taken the position for personal-intrinsic reasons (Figures 1 and 2).

What about the chairs’ satisfaction with their institutions and departments? When the same chairs were asked to rate their departments, the vast majority expressed a high degree of satisfaction: 98% rated the quality of their faculty as “average to excellent;” 90% rated the personal relations among faculty in their departments as “average to excellent;” and 97% rated the relations with students as “average to excellent.” Few, less than 3%, rated these categories as “poor.” Regarding their institutions, three quarters of the department chairs rated the intellectual climate and quality of administration as “average to excellent” (86% and 71%, respectively). The only area with which department chairs expressed less than high satisfaction

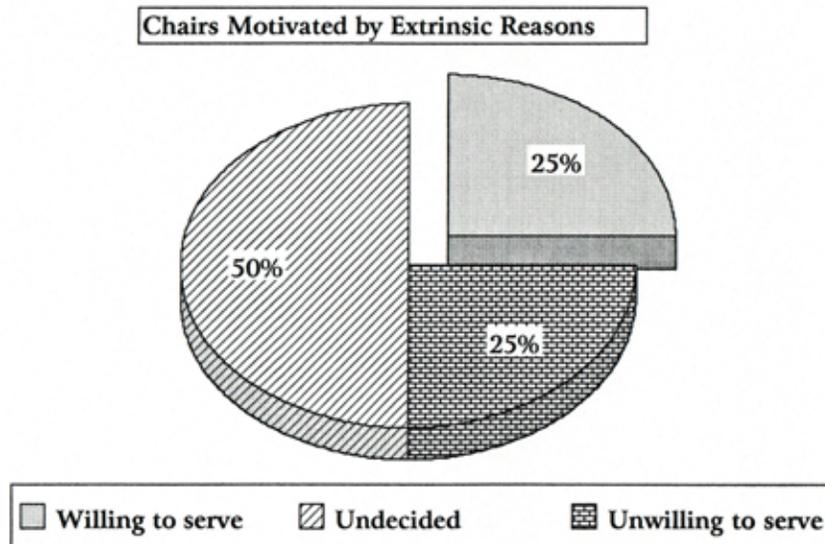


Figure 1 — A breakdown of chairs motivated to serve by extrinsic reasons.

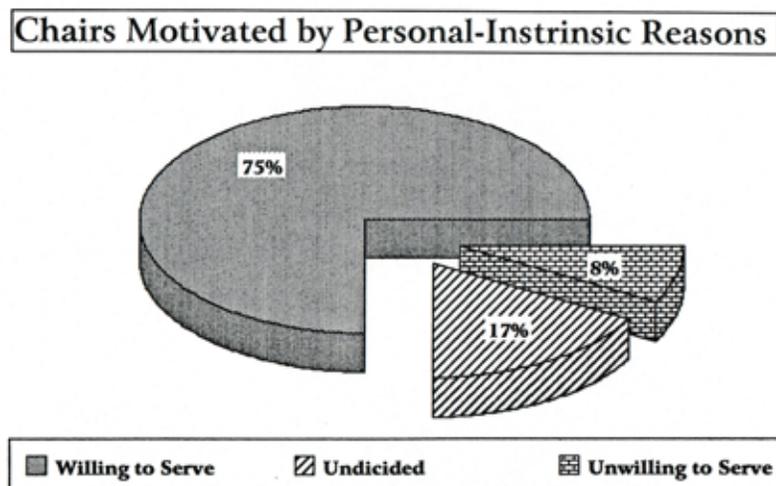


Figure 2 — A breakdown of chairs motivated to serve by personal-intrinsic reasons.

was salary (42% “below average”). Basically, department chairs are highly satisfied with their institutions and departments, but feel plagued by excessive stress and unresolved conflicts.

Regardless of your initial reasons for agreeing to serve as chair, your current motivation and commitment to continuing in administration will influence your ability to develop leadership capacity. With the current leadership crisis in higher education, it is critical to answer the “call to leadership.”

## How to Build Department Chairs

Academic leaders typically come to their positions without leadership training; without prior executive experience; without a clear understanding of the ambiguity and complexity of their roles; without recognition of the metamorphic changes that occur as one transforms from an academic to an academic leader; and without an awareness of the cost to their academic and personal lives (Gmelch, 2000). The transformation to academic leadership takes time and dedication, and not all faculty make the complete transition to leadership. This part of the article addresses the question of personal challenges academic leaders face and how to successfully make the transition to leadership.

### The Call Without Leadership Training

To become an expert takes time. The development of leadership ability is a long and complex process. The influence of family, peers, education, sports and social activities in high school and college (Wolverton & Gmelch, 2002) impact individuals ability to lead and their need for achievement, self-esteem, power, and service. “If experience is such an important teacher, and the motivation to lead is rooted in one’s past, and leadership skills are indeed so complex and related to one’s work and past, what role can training hope to play?” (Conger, 1992, p. 34).

How long does it take to become an expert? Studies of experts in the corporate world who attain international levels of performance point to the **10 year** rule of preparation (Ericsson, Krampe, & Tesch-Romer, 1993). Gladwell (2008), in his popular book *Outliers*, testifies it takes **10,000 hours** of practice to become an expert. In the American university, **7 years** represents the threshold for faculty to attain the status of expert in order to achieve tenure and promotion at the associate professor level, and another 7 years for full membership in the academy. Whether you accept the 10,000 hour rule, the 10 year rule or the 7-14 year rule -- why do we assume we can “build” a department chair with a **2 day** seminar? Does the Ph.D. represent a terminal degree, almost like terminal illness? Sadly, of the universities we have studied, only 3% have leadership development programs (Gmelch & Buller, 2015).

### The Call Without Administrative Experience

As emphatically stated previously, time of amateur administration is over. Department chairs often see themselves as scholars who, out of a sense of duty, temporarily accept responsibility for administrative tasks so other professors can continue with their teaching and scholarly pursuits. Nearly 80,000 scholars in the United State currently serve as department chairs and almost one quarter will need to be replaced each year. We have already established that opportunities for individual skill development through training is woefully inadequate, but what are we doing to provide leadership experiences to prepare our next generation of academic leaders? Even if we had systematic skill development opportunities available,

if you asked managers where they learned their leadership abilities, most will tell you from their job experiences. In fact, a poll of 1,450 managers from twelve corporations cited experience, not the classroom, as the best teacher for leadership (Ready, 1994). One should not draw the conclusion that formal training and education are of limited value, as academic leadership training combined with experience and socialization, can heighten faculty members’ appreciation for leadership and strengthen their motivation to develop leadership capabilities.

### The Call Without Understanding Role Conflict and Ambiguity

Caught between conflicting interests of faculty and administration, trying to look in two directions – department chairs often don’t know which way to turn. They mediate the concerns of the university mission to faculty and, at the same time, they try to champion the values of their faculty. As a result they find themselves swiveling between their faculty colleagues and university administration. In essence, they are caught in the god-like role of “Janus”, a Roman god with two faces looking in two directions at the same time. While department chairs don’t have to worry about being deified, they find themselves in a unique position -- a leadership role that has no parallel in business or industry (Gmelch & Miskin, 2004). To balance their roles they must learn to swivel without appearing dizzy, schizophrenic or “two-faced.” They must employ a facilitative leadership style while working with faculty in the academic core and a more traditional line-authoritative style with the administrative core.

### The Call Without Recognition of Metamorphic Changes

The drastic difference between the roles of scholar and administrator helps explain the difficulty in making the transition to department chair. As this transformation – aptly termed the “metamorphosis of the department chair” – takes place, several “faculty” functions and work habits change into “chair” work-styles. These new chair work-styles are much different from what you were used to as a faculty member and will take some adjustment. The following shifts outline nine transitions you face when moving from a faculty position to department chair (Gmelch & Seedorf, 1989; Gmelch & Parkay, 1999).

- *From solidarity to social.* Faculty typically work alone on research, teaching preparation and projects, while chairs must learn to work well with others.
- *Focused to fragmented.* Faculty have long, uninterrupted periods for scholarly pursuits, while the chair’s day is characterized by brevity, variety, and fragmentation.
- *Autonomy to accountability.* Faculty enjoy autonomy, while chairs become accountable to faculty, the dean, and central administration.
- *Manuscripts to memoranda.* Faculty carefully critique and review their manuscripts, while chairs must learn the art of quickly writing succinct, clear memos (and they are refereed!).
- *Private to public.* Faculty may block out long periods of time for scholarly work, while chairs have an obligation to be accessible throughout the day to the many constituents they serve.
- *Professing to persuading.* Acting in the role of expert, faculty disseminate information, while chairs profess less and build consensus more.

- *Stability to mobility.* Faculty inquire and grow professionally within the stability of their discipline and circle of professional acquaintances, while chairs must be more mobile, visible, and political.
- *Client to custodian.* Faculty act as clients, requesting and expecting university resources, while the chair is a custodian and dispenser of resources.
- *Austerity to prosperity.* While the difference in salary between faculty and administrator may be insignificant, the new experience of having control over department resources leads the department chair to develop an illusion of considerable “prosperity.”

The inner circle of Figure 3 portrays how the faculty members, typically socialized for 16 years, see themselves as solitary, focused, autonomous, private, professing, stable -- then suddenly they are selected, elected, or forced into transformation as an academic administrator characterized by its sociality, accountability, fragmentation, and mobility. This metamorphosis from professor to department chair takes time and dedication and not all make the complete transformation into leadership.

### The Call Without an Awareness of the Cost to Scholarship

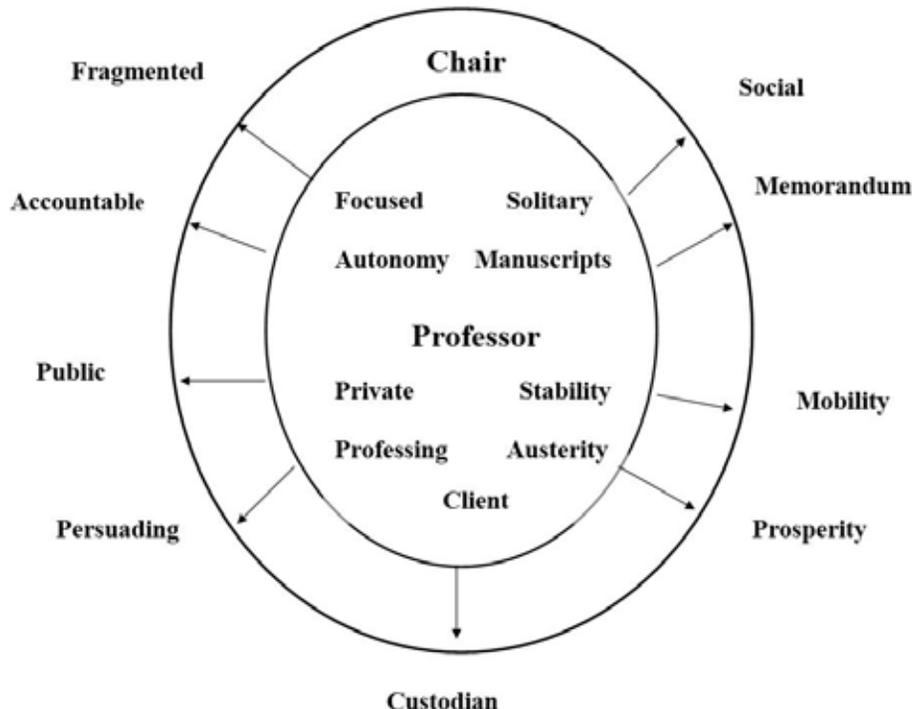
Department chairs try to retain their identity as scholars while serving in administration. Not surprising, most chairs feel most comfortable and competent in their scholar role. In fact, 65% of department chairs return to faculty status after serving in their administrative capacity, and therefore are wise to protect their scholarly interests. They express frustration at their inability to spend much time pursuing academic agendas. “Having insufficient

time to remain current in my discipline” causes the greatest stress for department chairs (Gmelch & Burns, 1994). Most department chairs would spend more time on their own academic endeavors if they could but find it virtually impossible because of the demands of leadership duties. If we are to build a sustained leadership capacity within our universities we must address the issue of balance in the academic leader’s life.

### Building Spheres of Leadership Development

My latest research has been to search for leadership development strategies for *Building Academic Leadership Capacity: A Guide to Best Practices* (Gmelch & Buller, 2015). However, the audience for this book is not faculty but university policy makers (deans, provosts, and presidents) responsible for recruiting and developing department chairs. If you are a faculty member possibly aspiring to be a department chair, let me suggest three spheres to serve as an analytical framework you must develop to be an effective chair.

**Conceptual Understanding.** Where do you work? What type of institution? What are the roles of a department chair? How is being chair of a Kinesiology department different that of an English department? The roles, responsibilities, tasks, and dimensions of department chair may be different given the context and organizational conditions of your college or university. Department chairs need to define academic leadership for themselves and find the right place and job fit. What does it mean to build a community of scholars, empower others, and set direction for your department? Conceptual understanding involved the knowledge that department chairs need in order to do their jobs effectively. It includes understanding the organizational culture and mastering the dynamics that distinguish on department from another. While conceptual understanding of leadership roles is a



**Figure 3** — The transformation from professor to chair. Gmelch, W. H. & Miskin, V. D. (2011). *Leadership skills for department chairs*. Madison, WI: Atwood Publishing, p. 15.

necessary condition to lead, it is not sufficient without application of appropriate behaviors and skills.

**Skill Development.** To perform the roles and responsibilities, chairs need to hone their skills. What skills are most important to be an effective chair? Some skills, such as communication, performance coaching, conflict resolution, negotiations, and resource deployment, are more readily teachable than complex competencies such as strategic vision, which requires a long gestation period and involves a multiplicity of skills (Conger, 1992; Westley, 1992). Department chairs identified the following dozen skills needed to be an effective leader (Gmelch & Buller, 2015, p. 16):

1. Managing time properly, particularly in the ability to maintain currency in research while performing administrative duties
2. Providing genuine leadership, not mere management, within the distinctive organizational structure of higher education
3. Instituting effective faculty development programs
4. Strategic thinking and creating a compelling vision for the future
5. Coaching and counseling faculty members so as to improve their performance
6. Making sound decisions
7. Communicating effectively with stakeholders
8. Managing conflict
9. Working harmoniously with upper administrative levels
10. Promoting teamwork
11. Building community
12. Leading change

The importance of these topics was validated by those found in most leadership development programs (Conger & Benjamin, 1999).

**Reflective Practice.** Understanding the department chair roles and possessing the requisite skills cannot be achieved without the ability to reflect, correct, and take action. Leadership development is an “inner” journey of self-knowledge, personal awareness, and corrective feedback. Moral, ethical, and spiritual dimensions are necessary to complete the leadership journey. To develop as a chair is very much about finding your voice (Kouzes & Posner, 1987). What trait or quality do faculty want most in their department chair? Honesty! Because credibility and authenticity lie at the heart of the chair’s relationship with faculty, identifying guiding beliefs and assumptions lie at the heart of becoming a good department leader. What is the kind of knowing in which competent practitioners engage? How is professional knowing like and unlike the kinds of knowledge faculty present in academic textbooks, scientific papers, and learned journals? Leaders exhibit a kind of knowing-in-practice, most of which is tacit.

Reflection-in-action is central to the art by which leaders deal well with situations of uncertainty, instability, uniqueness, and value conflict (Schon, 1983). Schon contends managers do reflect-in-action, but they seldom reflect on their reflection-in-action. Chairs isolation in their respective positions works against reflection-in-action. Hence, it is crucially important for department chairs to be networked and have confidants. They need to communicate their private dilemmas and insights, and test them against the views of their peers. Leadership development does not take place in a vacuum. It flourishes best within a group or with trusted colleagues

acting as mentors, partners, coaches, and role models. Department chairs need to create and use communication networks -- three types of networks:

1. *Operational network* to help you get work done efficiently and accomplish your duties;
2. *Professional/personal network* to develop your skills and personal advancement through coaching, mentoring, networking, learning at conferences; and
3. *Strategic network* to help you vision future priorities and challenges – the boundary spanning dimension of chairing (Ibarra & Hunter, 2011).

In summary, to develop as a department chair you must incorporate all three spheres of advancement: conceptual development, skill building, and reflective practice (see Figure 4). Each dimension integrates and builds upon the other, and a synergistic relationship characterizes all of them. Conceptual understanding builds your “*habits of mind*,” skill development your “*habit of practice*” and reflective practice your “*habits of heart*.” The development of campus department leaders rests with each person’s own motivation and talents and with the receptiveness and capacity of universities to support and coach such skills (Gmelch & Buller, 2015).



**Figure 4** — Development of academic leaders by incorporating all three spheres of advancement.

## What Do Department Chairs Do?

Are you considering stepping up and answering the call to lead your department? When I was tapped in 1986 by my colleagues to serve, I searched for what chairs did and found only one book, Allen Tucker’s *Chairing the Academic Department: Leadership Among Peers* (1981) – a classic but not very helpful. Virtually every managerial book ever written lists and exalts the tasks, duties, roles, and responsibilities of administrators. Lists specific to department chair duties range from the exhaustive listing of 97 activities identified by a University of Nebraska research team (Creswell et al. 1990), to the astonishing 54 varieties of tasks and duties cited by Allan Tucker, to the 40 functions forwarded in a study of Austra-

lian department chairs (Moses & Roe 1990). The genesis of these lists can be traced back to Siever's 12 functions, expanded to 18 by McCarthy, reduced to 15 by Hoyt, and expanded again to 27 by Smart and Elton (Gmelch & Miskin, 2004).

While these studies were robust, they gave chairs little guidance on what was important for chairs to do. This prompted the founding of The UCEA Center for the Study of Department Chair in 1988 (aka Center for the Study of Academic Leadership) and the subsequent research studies over the past twenty-five years of 1,600 university department chairs in the United States, 1,580 Australian department heads, 1,000 community college chairs, and an international study of 2,000 academic deans in America and Australia. With regard to the United States study of department chairs, the following were identified by three-quarters of the department chairs as the most important duties (Gmelch & Miskin, 2004):

1. Recruit and select faculty (93%)
2. Represent the department to the administration and discipline (92%)
3. Evaluate faculty performance (90%)
4. Encourage faculty research and publications (89%)
5. Reduce conflicts among the faculty (88%)
6. Manage department resources (85%)
7. Encourage professional development of the faculty (85%)
8. Develop and initiate long-range departmental goals (83%)
9. Remain current within the academic discipline (78%)
10. Provide informal faculty leadership (75%)

Remember the management axiom: What you pay attention to is what colleagues believe is important. Are the above duties worthy of and receiving your time and energy. If you are considering being a chair, remember these duties, and develop yourself to perform these tasks well.

Typical university policy manuals provide a list of the chairs' duties and responsibilities, such as organizing and supervising curriculum, distributing teaching/research loads, supervising department funds, recommending promotions and salaries, and so on. Check your college manual for your own local listings! While these numerous lists appear refined and comprehensive, they continue to represent fragmented activities without focus on what's most important—the results.

## The Four Roles of Department Chairs

Alternatively, rather than “pathologically listing” chair duties, consider four comprehensive roles of department chairs: the Faculty Developer, the Manager, the Leader, and the Scholar (see Gmelch and Miskin 2004 for further discussion of department chair roles).

The role of *Faculty Developer* is viewed by department chairs as their most important responsibility. It involves recruiting, selecting, and evaluating faculty, as well as providing the sort of informal leadership that enhances the faculty's morale and professional development.

Acting as *Manager*, the second role, is a requirement of the position, but often least liked by chairs. Chairs spend over half the week in departmental activities. Specifically, they perform the upkeep-functions of preparing budgets, maintaining department records, assigning duties to faculty, supervising non-academic staff, and maintaining finances, facilities, and equipment.

*Leader* best describes the third role of department chairs. As leaders of their departments, they provide long-term direction and vision, solicit ideas for department improvement, plan and evaluate curriculum development, and plan and conduct departmental meetings. They also provide external leadership for their departments by working with their constituents to coordinate department activities, representing their departments at professional meetings and, on behalf of their departments, participating in college and university committees to keep faculty informed of external concerns. Chairs seem to like this role, because it offers opportunities to help others develop professional skills, to stay challenged, and to influence the profession and department. Those chairs who enjoy such leadership activities spend more time performing them—not a surprising revelation! It is our hope that not only do department chairs enjoy this role, but that they take it most seriously when assuming their administrative position.

Finally, since 96% of chairs identify themselves as also faculty, they attempt to retain their *scholar* identity while serving as chairs. This includes teaching and staying current in their academic disciplines and, for those at research universities, maintaining an active research program and obtaining grants to support it. Chairs enjoy and feel most comfortable in this role, but express frustration with their inability to spend much time on their academic interests. Many would emphasize scholarship if they could, but find it virtually impossible (88% express frustration at their inability to spend much time pursuing their academic interests). Additionally, 86% of department chairs significantly reduced their scholarly activities while serving as chair; for some, scholarship more or less ceases (Gmelch & Miskin, 2004).

Where do your primary interests lie? Complete Exercise 1, *Department Chair Role*, (see Appendix) to assess your perception of how important each of the four roles is to you. Plot your scores on the diagram and reflect if some of your roles are deflated and need to be “pumped up.” Then, identify the most important tasks by which you obtain results within each role. Is your perception of your job in line with the reality of the results you get? If not, you may have to realign some of your time and energy to maximize your results. These adjustments should be made consciously as they are vital to your success. The chair's challenge is to weave all four roles into a sturdy fabric worthy of wear.

## Types of Department Chairs

Most academics lament about the “dark side” of being a department chair. As Dressel and his colleagues point out: “A scholar is not expected to seek or enjoy the position of chair” (1970, p. 82). Most would say privately that status and prestige come with the position. But to admit to their faculty colleagues that they enjoy the job causes suspicion. In public, chairs are reluctant to admit the pay-offs of administration as it is “unwise, even indecent, because it means one is proclaiming oneself as administrator, whereas most (chairs), especially those on short term appointments are anxious to remain, and to be seen to be, academics rather than administrators (Moses & Roe, 1990, p. 209).” If, in fact, one appears to enjoy the assignment or maintain it for several terms they become suspected of leaving their discipline for the comfort of administration or to justify their lack of scholarly contributions (Moses & Roe, 1990).

There is no one right type of chair. Each is different and unique in what she or he brings to the position. In the spirit of finding humor in the chair position and not taking ourselves too seriously, consider these types of department chairs.

- Department chairs who don't know which way to turn (faculty? administration?) are swivel chairs.
- Those chairs who play instruments are musical chairs.
- Those who overdress are upholstered chairs.
- Those who kick back and do nothing are recliner chairs.
- Those who collapse under pressure are folding chairs.
- Those unsteady on their feet are rocking chairs.
- Those who lazily go through the motions are lounge chairs.
- Those who do not have standards are easy chairs.
- Those who always complain are beach chairs.
- Those who write devastating reports are electric chairs.
- And those who dump on others are just plain stools.

Ultimately, most department chairs expressed satisfaction with their positions and found many rewards and benefits from serving their colleagues and departments which counterbalanced the frustrations. But the chair position is not perceived by many as a career move, rather a temporary service to colleagues, the institution, and profession.

## How Long Is Long Enough?

What is the life-span of a department chair? How long is long enough? Chairs normally serve six years, after which they typically follow one of two paths. Approximately one-in-five chairs move upward in academic administration and complete the full transition from faculty to administration. However, most chairs (65%) do not continue in administration, but return to faculty status where many remain until retirement.

Do long-serving department chairs feel plateaued at some point? After four years? Six years? More? There is no set formula, but just being competent is not enough to be productive and keep

the fire alive. Staying as a department chair too long results in losing interest in the job, failing to keep up with changes your discipline, not keeping up with your scholarship, and possibly entering a performance plateau – a chair doom loop as portrayed in Figure 5 (Gmelch and Miskin, 2011a). New chairs enter Quadrant I with a steep learning curve as they learn new skills and find new interests. The “new chairs” progress to the “good chairs” as they become committed to the position and competent in their duties (Quadrant II). The confident chairs, now in Quadrant II, are careful not to go over the edge and down the slide to becoming a “damn chair” (Quadrant III) or a “doomed chair” (Quadrant IV). Chairs talk about the conditions that influenced the feeling of being plateaued in their position: the *repetition and routine* of tasks where the scenery starts looking the same; the *rate of return* on their investment of time and energy diminishing; a decline in their *learning curve*; an *atrophy in their skills*; and after *time in the office* for five or six years they felt they were not making a significant difference.

How do long-serving chairs keep their interest and on the edge of advancement? Several types of tactics are useful for chairs to keep the “fire alive” (Gmelch & Miskin, 2011b; Gmelch, Hopkins, & Damico, 2011).

- *Tinker tactics* can be used to stretch new skills and learn new ideas through new assignments, committees, commissions, team members, and faculty. Many chairs focus on retreading challenges inside the college and institution rather than retreating to another institution.
- Other chairs practice *toehold tactics* by searching outside the department, college or institution for new challenges from professional associations, national organizations, and interdisciplinary connections.
- Zigzag chairs explore *mosaic tactics* to look for greener grass in other professions such as national and state agencies or full time consulting.

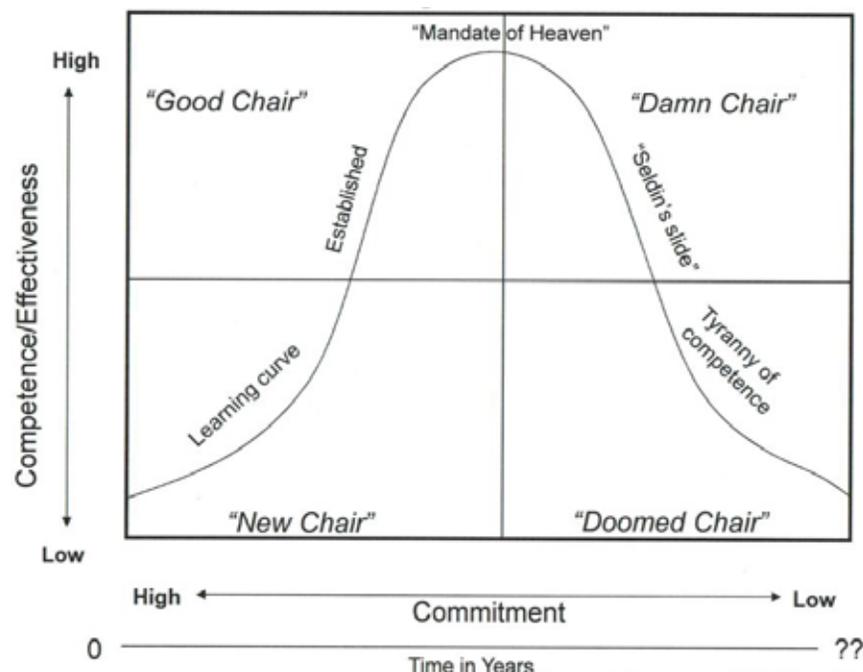


Figure 5 — The chair loop: “Zoom to doom”.

- Finally some chairs use *exploration tactics* when they reach the top of the their administrative mountain then realize being a department chair is not enough so they think about changing mountains -- seeking a deanship. Chairs can search inside, outside, across and beyond their current position and institution to prevent plateauing and keep their fires alive.

## Survival Skills

After serving as a department chair for a few years, department chairs described how they survived and kept the fire alive: (1) communicate in all directions -- to the dean and central administration, faculty, staff, students and external stakeholders; (2) realize that being a chair is “not about me” but serving others (see Wheeler, 2012); (3) know yourself by seeking feedback and expressing your values and beliefs to others; (4) enhance leadership and learning through seminars, conferences, reading, and exploration; (5) relate well to others, especially your dean; (6) hallucinate, get a vision; and (7) love being a chair or leave it. Life is too short to do it for the perks, if there are any!

Former chairs also advised chairs still in the trenches to keep the vision alive, advance the college, hire well, keep good faculty, give back to the profession, and have fun! Other chairs espoused words of advice for new chairs. Possibly motivated by their need for generatively or just generosity, the following is the sage advice they shared:

1. Be clear why you want to be a chair.
2. Become centered in your philosophy, values, and beliefs.
3. Pay attention to national issues in your profession.
4. Develop a university-wide perspective.
5. Build a multi-layered support network.
6. Develop your team.
7. Identify a mentor.
8. Take time for professional development.
9. Establish a strong academic record.
10. Play well with others – collaborate.
11. Find “personal-professional” and “scholar-leader” balance.
12. Take care of yourself – physically, socially, and intellectually.

## Did You Make a Difference?

Inevitably all chairs leave their positions. Is your destiny back to scholarship or on to higher levels of management? Before you leave, you may want to reflect on whether you made a difference. You may find it interesting to answer the following question: When you leave the chair position, what do you hope others will think you have accomplished? Hundreds of chairs from our studies across the United States reflected on this question and collectively viewed their accomplishments in the following light.

**Productive Climate.** Chairs wanted to be known for developing a sense of academic excitement, providing faculty with opportunity for gratification and satisfaction, enhancing faculty’s professional life, reducing the stress on faculty, and restoring peace and fostering growth among faculty.

**Collegial Atmosphere.** Many chairs hoped their faculty felt an improved sense of collegiality where conflicts could be healed, the level of civility was increased, morale was enhanced, and some peace and order was brought to the department.

**Program Advancement.** Many chairs aspired to build a national program, bring the department into the 21st Century, focus the department area of concentration, enhance the department’s reputation, increase the department’s status within the university, upgrade the department’s teaching and research, build better relations with the field, and modernize the curriculum and physical facilities.

**Quality Staffing.** Many chairs wanted to leave their legacy by recruiting and developing competent faculty, especially by promoting women and minorities and nurturing young faculty members.

**Quality Leadership.** Chairs reflected on their personal qualities and hoped they would be respected for their honesty, openness, fairness, justice and altruism. They also sought to provide the vision and strategic direction needed to advance the mission of the department into the next century.

## Final Advice: A Dozen Lessons Learned

To chair, or not to chair? For many, there are no easy answers concerning which way to turn. But, as the Cheshire cat told Alice, if you don’t know where you are going, any road will get you there. So let’s conclude with some sage advice:

1. Wait until you have been promoted to full professor before you accept the chair position.
2. Never accept the chair position before you are tenured.
3. Accept the position *early* enough to keep your options open if you want to move into university administration.
4. Accept your position *late* enough so you have time to establish your academic credentials and credibility.
5. Take time to learn the position.
6. Find a confidant *outside* your department – and *inside* your personal life -- for guidance and direction.
7. Seek a mentor chair to guide you through the initial white waters of leadership.
8. Separate work and non-work activities so you maintain personal and professional balance.
9. Create a golden parachute – negotiate an automatic sabbatical to regain currency in your discipline.
10. Find humor in the day -- one who laughs, lasts (Humor, never leave for home without it!).
11. Becoming a department chair is a journey – a journey many chairs fail to complete.
12. Finally, start by writing your legacy: How would you want to be remembered by your colleagues?

Did you make a difference? Did you leave a legacy? As a concluding note, when we surveyed several hundred heads of departments in Australia, three themes emerged from their legacy statements: (1) We advanced **our programs** – our department is in a better place than before; (2) We advanced **people** – faculty and staff were promoted; and (3) We did it with **decency!**”

*If you had to write your legacy today, what would it be?*

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## Appendix—Exercise 1: Department Chair Role

### Chair Role

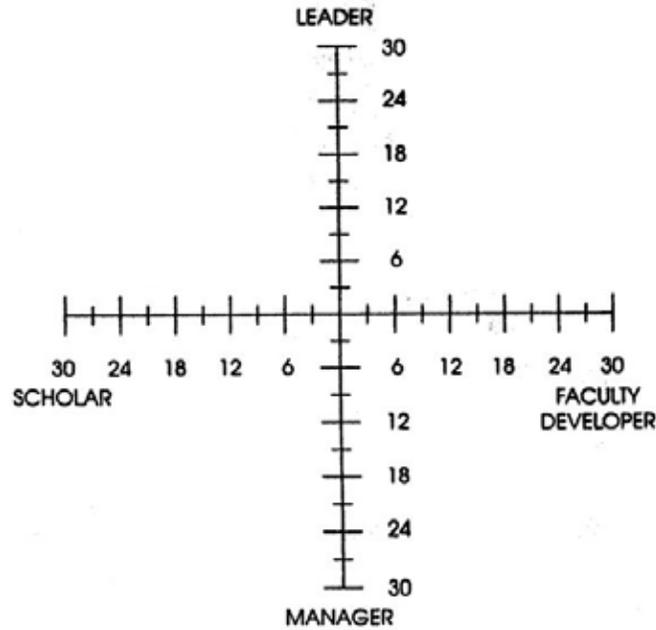
A. Listed below are 24 typical duties of department chairs. Please answer the following questions for each of the duties listed.

	How important to you is each chair duty?				
	Low				High
<b>Leader</b>					
Coordinate departmental activities with constituents	1	2	3	4	5
Plan and evaluate curriculum development	1	2	3	4	5
Solicit ideas to improve the department	1	2	3	4	5
Represent the department at professional meetings	1	2	3	4	5
Provide informal faculty leadership	1	2	3	4	5
Develop and initiate long-range vision and departmental goals	1	2	3	4	5
<b>Scholar</b>					
Obtain resources for personal research	1	2	3	4	5
Maintain research program and associated professional activities	1	2	3	4	5
Remain current within academic discipline	1	2	3	4	5
Obtain and manage external funds (grants, contracts)	1	2	3	4	5
Select and supervise graduate students	1	2	3	4	5
Teach and advise students	1	2	3	4	5
<b>Faculty Developer</b>					
Encourage professional development efforts of faculty	1	2	3	4	5
Encourage faculty research and publication	1	2	3	4	5
Recruit and select faculty	1	2	3	4	5
Maintain conducive work climate, including reducing conflicts	1	2	3	4	5
Evaluate faculty performance	1	2	3	4	5
Represent department to administration	1	2	3	4	5
<b>Manager</b>					
Prepare and propose budgets	1	2	3	4	5
Plan and conduct department meetings	1	2	3	4	5
Manage department resources (finances, facilities, equipment)	1	2	3	4	5
Assure the maintenance of accurate department records	1	2	3	4	5
Manage non-academic staff	1	2	3	4	5
Assign teaching, research and other related duties to faculty	1	2	3	4	5

### Department Chair Role Orientation Scoring

The Department Chair Orientation Instrument is keyed to four different roles Department chairs perform.

B. Add your total score for each role. Plot your scores on the appropriate axes below, then connect the points with straight lines to get a visual representation of your dominant and back-up chair orientations.




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W.H. Gmelch & V.D. Miskin (2004). Chairing an Academic Department, Madison, Wisconsin: Atwood Publishing, p. 23.