Chairing the Foreign Language and Literature Department

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The Foreign Language Department in the Liberal Arts College

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AT FIRST glance it appears that little separates the chairs of liberal arts colleges from their counterparts at PhD-granting institutions. The problems, personalities, and issues involved overlap, to be sure. The real distinction is, perhaps, not so much in the duties of the chair as in the relation between the chair and the institution and how it necessarily affects all the chair's activities.

One fine spring day, the newly appointed or elected chair receives official notification. As he or she will soon learn, the view from above little resembles the expectations and the perceptions of the position from below. Initially, the new chair is excited to be involved in the decision-making process for reviews, tenure, course assignments, recruitment, budgets, and all the other "fascinating" aspects of the job. The new chair will soon discover, however, that the position of chair is not one of power and authority but, rather, one of service to the community and one's colleagues. In agreeing to serve, the chair in a liberal arts institution makes a commitment to work diligently and to balance the often conflicting needs of students, staff, faculty colleagues, and administrators. The successful chair must find a way to serve all these constituencies while maintaining the trust of colleagues and the confidence of the administration and keeping the best interests of the students and the long-term interests of the institution at heart.

Let us begin with a candid assessment of the "service" aspect of the position. Serving as chair at a liberal arts college is considered part of the normal obligation to share the administrative load, like committee work and other contributions to the institution. This service may or may not be rewarded with released time, increments to salary, or credit toward various bonuses. At liberal arts institutions such compensation is usually a token, intended simply to signal gratitude and not to compensate one fully for the time, effort, and energy taken away from other aspects of one's academic life. Nonetheless, the administration expects a chair to carry out the duties of the position competently, professionally, and confidentially and to treat the institutional needs and priorities defined by the administration and faculty as paramount to other competing loyalties. Even though one is not paid for the job, the expectations are not unlike those held of our colleagues in PhD-granting centers, where chairs are usually given specific and substantial compensation. Russians tell the story of a foreign correspondent who asks some construction workers why they aren't working very hard. They reply, "Since the state only pretends to pay us, we only pretend to work." Under the circumstances, it is a wonder that some of the work of chairs gets done at all.

A chair at any institution sooner or later will encounter situations in which the desires of department colleagues, staff, and students and the needs of the department conflict with the institutional administrative needs. At many large institutions the chair is not only a faculty member but also a member of the administration compensated to carry out the policies of the employer as determined by senior staff. At a small college, the relationship is fundamentally different. Ideally, the chair has input in institutional administrative decisions. But how does one act when a policy or proposal, such as the elimination of a language from the curriculum, is at odds with the best interests of individual department members? Are the loyalties of the paid employee different from those of the "volunteer"? How is the chair to proceed, suspended over the abyss between two competing sides and lacking guidance? How do we best serve many constituencies? Intelligently, thoughtfully, creatively, and very carefully!

Let us follow in the footsteps of a typical chair over the course of a year, examining the multiple duties and responsibilities of the post, as well as the tightrope walking required. Our year begins in September, when the chair carries out the courtesy requirements of the job—welcoming new faculty members and old, overseeing the placement and registration of students, balancing courses, adjusting to surprises (or disappointments) in enrollments, and trying to keep the students happy—all the while organizing his or her own courses. Already two major issues loom: academic-leave requests and requests for replacement. Both issues require a delicate balancing act. Leave requests seemingly represent a clear-cut decision: it is obviously in the best interests of our colleagues for us to support such requests. But the chair must determine whether the colleague will not be replaced (i.e., if the department can do without the faculty member for that semester or a full year), or if it is imperative that the position be filled. The former choice will likely strengthen the candidate's application; the latter might jeopardize the colleague's chances for leave. Little time is permitted for consultation or seeking advice since, if the department wishes to interview replacements at the December MLA convention, it must submit ad copy to the MLA *Job Information List* in September. In making this decision, the chair should be guided by the realization that the immediate benefit to the colleague—the opportunity for leave—also serves the long-term interests of students and the college, even if an unreplaced leave temporarily burdens the department.

In October new course proposals for the spring are due. The question of which courses will be taught and by whom requires a meeting of the minds with faculty members young and old. The process is one of compromise and consensus-building, for the chair has only limited power to assign teaching duties, especially to senior colleagues. Liberal arts college chairs often have neither "carrots" nor "sticks" to motivate faculty members, since they have little influence in determining or allocating the traditional incentives—such as salary increases, bonuses, and research funds—available to many a graduate school chair. In the small liberal arts college, the chair must rely almost entirely on an ability to negotiate, mediate, and compromise. The successful department should resemble a family in which there is a belief that most things in life should be fair (even in institutions not guided by this principle of equity). The need to be fair frequently means that the chair must be willing, like a well-intentioned parent, to carry a disproportionate burden in the interest of the common good. Likewise, the determination of and recommendations for faculty teaching loads that are submitted to the administration frequently must reflect a willingness to be just a bit more generous (a generosity unspoken and likely to go unnoticed) with younger colleagues.

October is already time, if you have not yet done so, to begin with the system of review, which has become increasingly formalized and legalistic as colleges act to avoid litigation. The review process is, perhaps, the thorniest issue the chair faces. The chair is often personally responsible for having brought the person being reviewed to campus in the first place and therefore has a vested interest in the success of the new colleague. And in the early stages, classroom visitations and reviews are done with an eye toward improving teaching performance. Thus constructive, supportive criticism is called for at the initial stages—even if it already appears that the subject's teaching might be seriously flawed. The chair cannot risk undermining the beginning teacher's confidence and causing serious damage to the academic experience of students enrolled in those courses. Those outside the process tend to encourage frank and open discussions with the individual under review, but they fail to appreciate how important it is to establish personal and collegial relationships at the outset of one's career. In these early stages, the chair should solicit but not necessarily count on support from departmental colleagues, since many of them feel equally uncomfortable evaluating junior faculty members, especially if the evaluators might be called on to defend their judgments publicly. If the chair has tried to encourage better performance by stressing the positive while trying tactfully to correct deficiencies, how difficult then the moment when classroom review is done for the sake of evaluation and continuation of employment and not primarily for collegial support. The process varies from institution to institution, but at some point and in some form the chair will be expected to provide a written assessment of the junior colleague's work and to summarize the department's recommendation. Perhaps more than any other document, this letter captures the essence of the chair's dilemma and the enormous burden of the position. Called upon by administrators and colleagues to make a frank (often brutally so) assessment of the junior colleague's teaching, scholarship, and service and to recommend reappointment or dismissal, the chair may find himself or herself curiously alone. Such letters written today are not the strictly confidential documents of years gone by. In many places the contents of the letter, either verbatim or in summary, must be presented to the candidate by the chair before the final decision. Even if the letters are presumably protected by institutional policies, any legal action brought in case of a negative decision is likely to require that the documents be made public. Other colleagues who are involved in the process but not held publicly responsible or accountable for their actions may curry favor with the candidates. As a result, confidential letters written about the colleague under review may be made available to the candidate while confidential letters refuting the chair's and the department's recommendations and criticizing the chair are kept private. There is no easy way to share a negative evaluation with a young colleague, and doing so is perhaps a chair's most difficult duty. Even the decision itself has in recent years acquired new complexity. The termination of a faculty member can provide an administration with an opportunity to reduce staff without having to take an active role in that reduction. The chair must have full discussions with other department members concerning the possible outcomes of a review. As for the review itself, I have found it useful to require colleagues to submit their thoughts in writing. Such comments are more likely to be reserved, moderate, and defensible.

The staff (secretaries, assistants, etc.) has also come under more frequent and systematic review, and at some institutions staff members in turn review their supervisors' performance. The review of a secretary or administrative assistant by the chair can be a no-win situation. Although

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nominally the supervisor, the chair rarely has direct control over salary or other bonuses and usually has little influence on the termination or retention of staff members. At best a positive review can result in a very minor supplement at salary time, and whatever the increase, it will not be directly traceable to the chair's good word. Yet a fair but even mildly critical review can interfere with the personal relations so necessary in small institutional groupings. I have not found colleagues willing to criticize staff performance on the record, because such action produces no visible and immediate result. Thus the procedure itself encourages euphemism and, sometimes, different versions of the same story. Administrations are quick to point out that staff review is most successful when it leads to the positive growth of an employee. A chair should understand that principle and realize that such growth will occur only when criticisms are accompanied by achievable solutions.

Meanwhile, by mid-fall the recruitment process has begun in earnest: developing a procedure for the search in keeping with the strict boundaries established by the institution, replying to prospective candidates, sharing dossiers with colleagues. Increasingly, much of this effort takes place with little secretarial support, and in small departments (including most language departments) the burdens of setting up interviews, attending the conference, and doing the interviewing fall on the chair. Recent budgetary restrictions have led institutions to cut some costs by limiting the interviewing team to the chair and foregoing campus visits for temporary replacements, for example. Under these circumstances the chair must be ready to represent the faculty while simultaneously taking full responsibility for the ultimate choice.

Just as the recruiting process heats up with the new calendar year, salary and budgetary considerations begin. Salary, as we have already mentioned, is not likely to be controlled by a chair at a liberal arts college. If my own institution is any guideline, the discussions are largely pro forma and simply provide an opportunity to talk to the provost or academic vice president about the department's strengths, weaknesses, prospects, and problems. The chair must realize that, however well the department's members have performed, the pie is small and any modifications to salary will be so minor as to be hardly noticeable. The attention might make first-time chairs feel good, but beyond the socializing function the yearly conference serves little purpose unless the chair is realistic about what can be accomplished there. Typically at such meetings the chair makes compelling arguments on behalf of a salary increase for colleagues but not for himself or herself. Instead of focusing solely on salary issues, the chair can direct the conversation toward a comprehensive statement of the department's achievements and contributions to the college at large and toward a realistic and forward-looking assessment of its needs, thus setting the foundation for future requests.

Budget submission, done sometime in February, calls for creativity, even when little difference can be made in the bottom line. In the face of ever-increasing costs, many budgets have been level-funded or cut in past years. The actual preparation of the budget is an opportunity to look beyond the total funds available and examine how savings (e.g., those made possible by technology) might be better applied to other budget items. Renting or purchasing foreign language videotapes instead of paying for a single showing of a film is just one way dollars can be stretched. When chairs are responsible for submitting budgets, they are also held accountable by the administration for monitoring and controlling spending by faculty members—even though chairs are rarely empowered to make changes in the budget. Overseeing the cash flow is, alas, a thankless aspect of our job. The chair is placed in the role of budget administrator and held accountable for encouraging (then enforcing) fiscal responsibility in every area from telephone calls and photocopying expenses to supplies. The need for fiscal responsibility must be balanced against legitimate academic needs and the increased cost of operations. In general, I have found that the less mention of money there is, the happier everyone will be; the chair must exercise judgment on when a word of caution is absolutely necessary and likely to be effective. In addition, my own experience has been that one should strive to spend the funds allocated; although in theory the failure to spend funds in any given year should not have negative consequences, sums are rarely carried over to the next budget year to give credit for fiscal responsibility.

In the first few days of March the chair must determine the new schedules, teaching loads, and assignments for the coming academic year. Does the chair defend the position of the administration in seeking to maintain or increase teaching loads, or does he or she follow the interests of the faculty in pursuing a fair course load across the college? In the best interests of our students, we should not shortsightedly demand that out colleagues share an unequal teaching burden that may later prove a disadvantage in review and tenure decisions. The unspoken rules of small colleges once demanded loyalty to the institution's goals, with the implied assurance that hard work would be remembered and rewarded. Unfortunately, people, not institutions, hold the memory of that service, and when people at the top change, faculty members can find their exemplary service to be largely forgotten by a new team of administrators. As an efficient manager, one ought to obtain from each faculty member maximum effort in the classroom and additional commitments to strengthen the department's offerings. As a responsible friend, colleague, and adviser, the chair must also caution junior department members to balance the lure of the classroom and outside commitments with the real requirements of promotion and tenure.

In April thoughts turn already to the incoming first-year class. At my college, chairs telephone many of the accepted high school seniors who have expressed interest in our departments. By offering congratulations, information, and invitations to visit the campus, we hope to bring the best and brightest students to our classrooms in September.

The year ends as it began, with another round of social obligations—to students and their parents at graduation and to colleagues as they head off for summer research and travel. The final report, including statistics and forms galore on the recruiting process, serves as a review of the past year and a chance to make resolutions for the upcoming year. What the report never adequately indicates is the number of hours spent telephoning associates, typing at the computer, consulting with colleagues, attending meetings, formulating proposals, and solving disputes, all of which steal the chair's time. Here there is truly no difference between larger graduate institutions and smaller liberal arts colleges. The people may be different, but the issues and the personal and personnel problems are likely to be the same.

What the final yearly report makes clear one more time is the service aspect of working as chair. More and more I hear chairs complaining that the burdens of the job are inadequately understood and largely unappreciated by those above and below them in the pecking order. Congratulations for a job well done are rarely expressed by those whom one serves. In addition, the relationship between individuals and institutions has been dramatically altered in the past few years. The "paternalistic" model of the college, the assumed promise of lifelong employment, has given way to the corporate model of the workplace, where financial considerations dominate over personal issues. Loyalty to one's employer can no longer be seen as a guarantee of job security. The memory of institutions is only as long as the memory of the newest occupant of their key administrative positions. These changes, which have occurred throughout society, will affect the future role of the chair at the liberal arts college.

In the face of what seems a substantial burden and an ever-increasing workload for chairs, one might reasonably ask, Why continue to serve? I continue to serve because I am convinced that I can make a contribution to the life of my college. My experience with people and processes and the wisdom I have acquired over the years can help foster careers, moderate and resolve conflicts, and get things done. As a teacher of language, literature, and culture, I have made a personal commitment to communication and to understanding and appreciating the infinite variety of experience. Being chair makes use of talents, organizational skills, and communicative strategies that reach beyond the classroom and the scholarly treatise. And I believe that as chair I can make some decisions in a more informed, more creative, and kinder way than some other colleagues. When all is said and done, being chair has let me, in some way, make my college a better place to live and learn for students and colleagues. That is why I serve, and most times I do so with a smile.