

department chairs—at the helm of that change is the best decision an institution can make. ▲

Robert E. Cipriano is professor emeritus in the Department of Recreation and Leisure Studies at Southern Connecticut State University, senior partner in ATLAS consulting, and author of *Facilitating a Collegial Department in Higher Education* (Jossey-Bass, 2011). Richard L. Riccardi is director of the Office of Management Information and Research at Southern Connecticut State University. Email: ciprianor1@southernct.edu, riccardir1@southernct.edu

The Department Chair's Return Journey

WALTER H. GMELCH

As a department chair, you hold the most critical role in the university and the most unique management position in America. I have previously asked the question: How long is long enough to serve as chair (Gmelch and Miskin 2011a)? We know department chairs serve six years on average and then head in any one of three directions: approximately 20% move up in administration; 70% return back to their faculty positions; and 10% retire from or expire in their positions. Now the questions are: Why do department chairs leave their positions? and How can they “leave right” and retain their legacy?

In the summer 2013 issue of *The Department Chair*, Dennis Smith astutely outlined an exit strategy for chairs. This article supplements his work with the qualitative answers to the why and how questions in leadership transition. We may know where department chairs go, but why do they leave their position and how can they “leave right”? Although the literature on these questions is silent, we have gained some insights from interviews with forty-two departing academic leaders. This article first explores the push

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and pull factors that motivate a chair's departure and then provides advice on how to leave right.

Upon entering the academy very few academics have said, “I want to be a department chair.” But many, when they received the call from their dean or colleagues, responded with a willingness to serve their faculty, institution, and profession. When is it time to return to their roots or move on from their current position? What motivated them to leave? Two forces provided the impetus to make a move. Some internal forces pulled them to new challenges and other forces pushed them out of the position.

Push Factors

The following push factors influence a chair's decision to leave the position.

Lack of support. Given the difficult economic times, many chairs said they could not stay and watch their departments become dismantled due to diminishing financial resources and support. Over time chairs also make difficult decisions that are not always accepted by faculty. One department chair recommended, “Once you lose 51% of

your faculty support you better develop an exit strategy.” You have to know when to get out and not be like the frog sitting in a pot of water slowly approaching the boiling point—and expiring. Otherwise, you too will expire.

Incompatibility with the dean. If chairs do not have the confidence of or credibility with the dean, then they can't lead. Some chairs felt a lack of moral support from the dean and upper administration. If the dean did not value their leadership, their academic discipline, and/or their department, chairs said it was almost impossible to be effective under such conditions.

Poor job fit. One provost asserted, “Not all excellent scholars make effective department chairs—some should stay in their labs for that is why we hired them.” If it takes ten thousand hours of practice to become an expert (Gladwell 2008)—the equivalent of eight years as chair—and only 3% of colleges and universities provide leadership training, then chairs are doomed from the beginning.

Poor personal fit. Personal fit requires the 3Cs of effective leadership: commitment, competence, and comfort. Chairs must be committed to serving their colleagues, competent in their leadership in order to build a community of scholars, and comfortable with challenges and dealing with conflict.

Pull Factors

Many department chairs indicated that internal pull factors drew them back to the faculty, across to another institution as chair, or up to higher administration.

Returning to research agendas (Smith 2013). Most chairs remained committed to their disciplines and many yearned to return before they lost their edge. In fact, the greatest stress experienced by department chairs is not conflict or dealing with administrivia, but “Having insufficient time to stay current in my academic field” (Gmelch and Miskin 2011b, 121).

Accomplishing milestones. Ask yourself, “What do I want to have

achieved in my tenure as chair?" Once you have met your milestones, your legacy has been established and it is time to move on before you plateau. One chair reflected, "After six years, I made the impact I wanted and if I stayed for another term my degree of impact would diminish."

Looking for a new challenge. After a few years of sitting in the chair's seat, the scenery starts looking the same. The bimonthly meetings with the dean address more mundane management issues than cutting-edge leadership opportunities. Some felt that after spending five or six years in the office they were not making a significant difference.

Slumping learning curve. Most academics entered the academy because they wanted to be lifelong learners. What better job than to be paid to learn and teach others. Although the chair requirements have a steep learning curve, after a while the curve plateaus and the lack of intellectual stimulation due to the "madness of meetings" and "administrivia" becomes deafening (Gmelch, Hopkins, and Damico 2011, 42).

A senior administrator provided sage advice on transition: "Be pulled, not pushed, out of your position." Another commented, "Never stay until you are asked to leave!"

How to Leave Right

The departing academic leaders I interviewed shared 112 pieces of sage advice for "leaving right." Offered here is a representative sampling of six strategies to add to your repertoire of how to leave right.

Pass the baton, not the gavel. One chair used the metaphor of a relay race. He observed his son in a 4X100 relay race where he ran at full speed to pass the baton to the next runner and kept running after passing it along to ensure a smooth transition. In the same way, the transition to the next department chair should not be seen as passing the gavel but passing the baton: a transition period whereby both the incumbent and

incoming chair run together.

Cross the finish line in a sprint. Using the same track metaphor, another chair advised that when you are approaching the end of your term, don't slow down as you approach the finish line but end in a sprint. Demonstrate your commitment to your colleagues and department by finishing projects and tying up loose ends to give the new chair a clean slate.

Take care of others impacted by your exodus. While most department chairs believed they were in control of their decision to make the next move, they realized others felt vulnerable with their departure. "Two groups are impacted more than others—staff and assistant professors," testified one chair. Most office staff serve at the pleasure of the chair, and the chair's departure may be met with some trepidation. In the same vein, untenured, adjunct, and term faculty may feel insecure with the change in leadership. What can you do to provide guidance or objective assurances to those most vulnerable in this time of transition?

Regain "flow" time. Chairs' time has been characterized by brevity, variety, and fragmentation (Gmelch and Miskin 2011b). For those chairs who are returning to faculty, they need to regain control over their time, requiring a shift from "fragmented" to "flow" time. As one departing administrator commented, "I used to think in 'hours and minutes' and now I see the future in terms of 'seasons or semesters.'" However, this transition from fragmented to flow will take time. One academic leader realized the only thing he wrote in the last six months was his name. Another long-serving administrator said he had to learn to read again—a reverse metamorphosis from memos to manuscripts. Transitioning back to teaching and research is difficult. All department chairs who have served five or six years should receive an automatic sabbatical to regain flow time. Dennie Smith (2013) even suggests one semester of professional leave for two to three years of administrative service, two semesters for

four or more years, and three semesters for more than eight years of service.

Reflect on your legacy. Inevitably, chairs leave; they break or become out of date. Is it your destiny to return to your scholarship or go on to higher levels of leadership? Before you leave, you may want to reflect on the difference you have made. What do you hope others in your department will think you have accomplished? If you had to write your legacy today, what would it be?

Conclusion

Think of the aforementioned strategies for leaving right as helping to build a path to your next move. One of the most glaring shortcomings in the leadership area is the scarcity of sound research on the training and transitioning of leaders. Lines of succession for chairs are unclear, and chairs' relatively high turnover rate (one in five, annually) suggests that we do not groom our leaders in ways that promote longevity, success, and effectiveness. Higher education can ill afford the luxury of almost total inattention when it comes to leadership succession. ▲

Walter H. Gmelch is a professor in the Department of Leadership Studies and former dean of the School of Education at the University of San Francisco. Email: whgmelch@usfca.edu

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