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Regional

Department chairs play key role in education

In higher education, it has always been said that the position of departmental chair is one of the most difficult jobs. Chairs usually take over the responsibility of managing the affairs of their academic units without previous in-depth preparation for the job and do so in a difficult position where they have to implement policies and practices from the college and university's administration, while having to still deal with their colleagues on a daily basis.

On top of that they tend to return to the faculty as another foot soldier after their stint as chair, having to live with the decisions they had to make about colleagues without any protection from one or another form of retribution.

To make things worse, department chairs are now expected to do things unheard of years ago, such as fundraising, recruiting of students and marketing of their own departments – all in a climate of reduced budgets and other administrative support.

Now a new study suggests what we have always suspected: department chairs take on their jobs without appropriate training.

A recent study funded by the University Council for Educational Administration that looked at department chairs' roles, responsibilities, stresses, job satisfaction and career trajectory, shows how badly prepared most new chairs feel when assuming their responsibilities.

The 336 respondents to their survey represented all kinds of institutions and disciplines. Two-thirds came from private institutions, and most were from campuses without faculty unions.

Dr. Aldemaro Romero Jr. Letters from Academia

Among the major results of the study are that the average term one serves as chair is about four years, 67 percent of chairs receive no formal training from their institutions and those who do receive training get 10 hours or fewer. The little training they do get has to do more with paper pushing types of things – such as how to prepare a budget sheet – rather than more complicated tasks such as how to deal with faculty that do not perform or how to maneuver delicate situations such as sexual harassment.

No wonder that even 67 percent of the few who receive some kind of training say that it did not prepare them adequately for their jobs. They say they wish that they had received more training in areas such as evaluation of faculty performance, maintaining a healthy work climate, obtaining and managing external funds, preparing and proposing budgets and developing long-range goals.

In most cases they had to learn those skills on their own. Most respondents to the survey say it took them between six and 18 months to feel comfortable dealing with those issues. Yet despite the adjustment period, 89 percent of chairs say they would do the job again, though few reported plans to move up in the administrative ranks. The pool from which university administrators come from keeps shrinking, making it harder to get people

who are able to assume other responsibilities, such as dean and above.

Most respondents say that they decided to become chairs in order to advance their departments, rather than their own careers.

Although there are a few organizations that offer training for chairs outside their own institutions, such as the Council of Colleges of Arts and Sciences, very few have the opportunity to contrast how the role of a chair is done outside of their own institutions. Only about half of the chairs responding to the survey said that they network with other chairs on operational, professional and strategic issues.

Other issues affecting departmental chairs include balancing work-life demands and keeping up with email in departments that – mostly due to because of budget cuts – have fewer office assistants to provide administrative assistance to the chairs.

When comparing the results of this study with a similar one which took place in 1991, some 70 percent of chairs now say they're part of both the faculty and the administration, compared to about half of respondents in 1991.

Another alarming finding is that only about 60 percent are full professors, meaning that a large chunk of departmental chairs also have to deal with the issue of advancing their academic career for both better recognition and pay. That is down from 80 percent in the 1991 study. Even worse, only 81 percent of them had tenure at the time that they became chairs.

It is also striking that despite the fact that there

is a lot of rhetoric about increasing diversity in academia, the proportion of minorities who occupy the position of chair is still miniscule. About 85 percent identify as white, 4 percent as Hispanic, 3 percent as black and 3 percent as Asian or Pacific Islander. Most chairs are between 46 and 55 years old. Most are married and about half have children at home. Twenty percent care for older parents.

In the final analysis, it is clear that most colleges and universities do not know how to provide adequate training for new chairs and that the assumption is that their roles will be learned "on the job." It is also not always clear who should be providing that training, whether it should be the dean or the provost and what other offices of the administration of the institution should be involved in it.

We should not forget that a chair is ultimately responsible for the development, mentoring and support of new faculty members and, therefore, have their futures – and that of their institutions – in their hands.

Unless we take more seriously the task of training departmental chairs, we risk compromising not only the lives of people who work very hard and for many years to become full-time faculty members but also the future of the institution itself.

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