

Leading from the department chair

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Leaders in two-year colleges have been described as a unique body of educational practitioners with leadership elements considered to be distinct and singular because of the special nature of the two-year institutions and their responsibilities. Effective leadership in the academic chair position has been deemed critical to institutional success. This article examines department organization and leadership in the community college and the potential implications of the community college mission.

Introduction

Leaders within two-year colleges have been described as a unique body of educational practitioners. Burnham (2002) noted that the leadership traits found in community college leaders are common to all leadership roles both within and outside of education. But, there are leadership elements distinct and singular because of the special nature of the two-year institutions and their responsibilities. With the strong emphasis on the career and transfer function of the community college, effective leadership in the chair position is critical to institutional success.

Community college department organization

The primary objective in creating academic departments in community colleges has been identified as one to create manageable organizational units, not to integrate the teaching among subjects (Cohen & Brawer, 2003). Departments may be “pure” or

“mixed” based on disciplines. Mixed departments, often referred to as “divisions,” are a combination of several disciplines brought together for administrative and economic efficiency and are common in community colleges (Hecht, Higginson, Gmelch, & Tucker, 1999, p. 5). Large community colleges may further subdivide divisions into departments according to discipline with a chair responsible to the division chair or dean. Size is often a factor in such a designation. In a study of community college organizational structure, Underwood and Hammons (1999) determined that:

1. 51% organized units by subject matter, followed by interdisciplinary units (28%), and then cluster units (19%) with no significant differences among different sized institutions;
2. 48% of the colleges were organized by divisions only and 42% by departments and divisions with mid-size institutions preferring the former and larger institutions preferring the latter;
3. 53% reported a faculty to division chair to vice president to president chain of command with the second most popular form at 25% being a report of faculty to department head to division chair to vice president to president with small and mid-sized institutions preferring the former and larger institutions almost evenly divided between the two models.

The term “chair” or “chairperson” has been identified as the most common reference when referring to the person who has daily contact with faculty, students, and administrators and has the responsibility of assuring quality for the academic unit (Byrne, 1997; Hecht et al., 1999; Seagren, Miller, Creswell, & Wheeler, 1994; Tucker, 1992). Yet, the lack of organizational standardization among community colleges makes it difficult to identify what title to use for administrators of the basic academic units. The position title may variously be seen as chair, head, coordinator, assistant dean or, in some cases, even dean (Seagren et al., 1994; Gillett-Karam, 1999).

Community college department leadership

The leadership provided by a department chair is a critical factor for success, yet one that has been described as being one of the most complex and ambiguous of all leadership positions (Hecht et al., 1999). Hecht et al. (1999, p.271) report that “departments are the heart and soul of our post-secondary institutions” and “serve as the home of disciplinary knowledge and as the intellectual and social base for faculty.” The chair has the intricate challenge of connecting the basic organizational unit to the larger institution, requiring leadership that builds bridges, creates connections, and defuses tensions (Hecht et al., 1999). As Gillett-Karam (1999, p. 5) notes:

The understandably complex position of department chair links students to faculty; faculty to administration; and people to the organization. Long considered the buffer between faculty and administration, the chair is more a mediator, communicator, and facilitator than any of the conventional descriptors bestowed on leaders by the literature.

The National Chair Academy Survey of 1992 was one of the first comprehensive studies of the department chair position in community and technical colleges (Filan, 1999). Three major clusters emerged in the roles determined to be important by the nearly 3,000 respondents: that of an interpersonal role, an administrator role, and a leader role (Seagren et al., 1994). Interpersonal roles include being an information disseminator, facilitator, mentor, and advocate. Administrator roles include being a resource allocator, evaluator, negotiator, and conflict resolver. Being a visionary, motivator, delegator, and planner tops the list of leader roles. Of the roles indicated as important, the planner role is perceived to be the most important. Tasks, skills, challenges, and strategies are also identified in the study. Follow-up studies by several other researchers have confirmed similar findings in studied community and technical college institutions (see Petty, 2000; Palmer & Miller, 2001).

Several commonalities are found in a study conducted by Tucker

(1992) comparing community college chairpersons with university chairpersons as they rate the importance of listed responsibilities. The responsibilities identified are listed under the headings of: department governance, instruction, faculty affairs/student affairs, external communication, budget and resources, office management, and professional development. Tucker found that both groups include the following five in the top ten, although not necessarily in the same rank order (1992, p. 30):

- Fostering good teaching
- Maintenance of faculty morale
- Recruitment and selection of faculty
- Communicating needs to the dean and interaction with upper-level administration
- Updating curriculum courses and programs.

Tucker also identifies the following characteristics of a chairperson who is both an effective leader and facilitator (1992, p. 49):

- Good interpersonal skills; ability to work well with faculty members, staff, students, deans, and other chairpersons
- Ability to identify problems and resolve them in a manner acceptable to faculty members
- Ability to adapt leadership styles to fit different situations
- Ability to set department goals and make satisfactory progress in moving the department toward the goals

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- Ability to search for and discover optimum power available to them as chairpersons; ability to maximize that power in motivating faculty members to achieve department goals and objectives
 - Active participation in their profession; respect of their professional colleagues

Hecht et al. (1999) indicate that Tucker was ahead of his time in seeing department chairs as leaders. The authors also note that the responsibilities of chairs have become more complex than when Tucker conducted his original study in 1984. The “work environment now includes an army of part-time adjunct and non-tenurable, full-time faculty ... budget responsibilities are being expanded” and chairs are expected to “have expertise in planning and even in fund-raising” (Hecht et al., 1999, p. xv). The classroom is also noted as undergoing significant change with curriculum and pedagogy demanding leadership attention as the central focus shifts from teaching to learning (Lucas, 2000).

The dual role of being an advocate for the department and an agent of the administration is made more difficult with various internal and external constituencies tending to hold “simple perceptions of the department chair’s role” (Hecht et al., 1999, p. 24). Today’s chairs must be managerial leaders, possessing both strong managerial and strong leadership skills (Yamasaki, 1999). The focus on one

role to the exclusion of the other jeopardizes trust, support, and the effectiveness of the position (Hillosky and Watwood, 1997). As the department manager and leader, the chair position is crucial to day-to-day operations, institutional and department planning, policy and outcomes. The role requires setting the department direction, inspiring and cultivating relationships, and developing collaborative initiatives on many levels.

A competency model

While not specific to the chair-position, a 2005 report of the American Association of Community Colleges advances a competency model to illustrate actions of an effective community college leader. To appreciate and use the competencies, the executive summary notes that participants must understand that “many members of the community college community can lead” (AACC, 2005, p. 2). Six competency categories are identified in the model (AACC, 2005, p. 3):

1. **Organizational strategy**
improves the quality of the institution, protects the long-term health of the organization, promotes the success of all students, and sustains the community college mission, based on knowledge of the organization, its environment, and future trends.
2. **Resource management**
equitably and ethically sustains people, processes, and information as well as physical

and financial assets to fulfill the mission, vision, and goals of the community college.

3. **Communication** uses clear listening, speaking, and writing skills to engage in honest, open dialogue at all levels of the college and its surrounding community, to promote the success of all students, and to sustain the community college mission.
4. **Collaboration** develops and maintains responsive, cooperative, mutually beneficial, and ethical internal and external relationships that nurture diversity, promote the success of all students, and sustain the community college mission.
5. **Community college advocacy** understands, commits to, and advocates the mission, vision, and goals of the community college.
6. **Professionalism** works ethically to set high standards for self and others, continuously improve self and surroundings, demonstrate accountability to and for the institution, and ensure the long-term viability of the college and community.

In a review of contemporary research on the chair position, Dyer and Miller (1999, p. 21) note that:

...the primary focus of research has been on the various roles and responsibilities, needed skills, and challenges and coping strategies facing the chair-

person. The literature base has suggested that some of the various roles and responsibilities that the chair must cope with are personnel administration, budgeting, planning and organization, student affairs issues, professional development, decision making, and program development.... In all, the department chair position is admittedly important, yet research has only begun to be exploratory in nature.

Their review in 1999 is especially notable in that only three studies specific to the community college are cited. A search of the ERIC and Dissertation Abstract databases since 1999 reveals fewer than 30 articles on research related to chair leadership and only seven related to department chair leadership in the community college.

Spaid and Parsons (1999) suggest that community colleges will need to depend on internal leadership to manage the sea of change in the coming years. They claim it will be imperative that “people learn to lead from where they are” (p. 13) and see middle management as playing a significant role in changing the focus of leadership. It is evident that continued research in the area of department chair leadership is needed to better understand the role as an agent of change.

Filan (1999) contrasts community and technical colleges with the private sector and notes that—unlike the private sector—community

and technical colleges provide minimal or no funds to develop their midlevel leaders. He also points out that those filling the chair position—the ones regarded as “key to the effective functioning of the college’s major academic and career programs” (p. 47)—generally receive little or no formal training for the job. For people in such pivotal positions to the organization, training, mentoring, and other leadership development activities are imperative.

Departmental leadership and the community college mission

The mission of an organization is said to be “what the institution purports to do” (Bogart, 1994). The name “community college” was popularized in the 1970s as it came to be applied to the growing publicly supported educational institutions that offered a comprehensive curriculum to meet the growing and diverse needs of the local community (Cohen and Brawer, 2003).

Although the mission statements of today’s comprehensive community colleges typically reflect the additional facets of continuing education, development education, and community service, the academic transfer preparation and vocational-technical education are two of the main areas of mission focus. As Bragg (2001) notes,

Almost from the start, community colleges have endeavored to serve many masters well,

but particularly two. They have tried to serve universities through a strong transfer function while also attempting to provide a viable vocational function to fulfill the needs of local employers. (p. 15)

Attention to mission has particular implications for chairs. Tucker (1992) notes that the real or perceived importance of any particular responsibility may vary from one chairperson to another depending on the mission, goals, and functions of the institution. Although the division or department structure may not be based on the transfer or career focus, the organizational structure is often based on subject areas or disciplines that do have one or the other focus. The faculty, students, curriculum, resources, expected outcomes, and other elements are all affected by the career or transfer emphasis of the department and how it is connected with the larger mission of the college. Matching the department mission and vision to the institution is a powerful driving force in how chairs view their position (Pettitt, 1999).

The widely varying roles attributed to the chair position come into question. Lombardi (1974) suggests several reasons for possible distortion or exaggeration of duties associated with the position. He notes the differences between chairpersons of liberal arts departments and vocational-technical departments among the reasons. For the former, he notes that the purchase, replacement, repair, and

inventorying of equipment is a minor responsibility compared to the greater importance for the latter group. Similarly, community activities such as job placement, membership on advisory committees, student internships, and clinical placements are a greater concern for the vocational programs than the liberal arts programs. When lists of duties are attributed to the position, one sees that some chairs perform a certain set of duties and others a different set (Lombardi, 1974). The result is homogeneously classifying a diverse group and creating a multiplier effect when enumerating chair duties. Carroll and Gmelch (1992) also indicate that the specific listing of duties can be misleading given the uniqueness associated with organizational, positional, and personal characteristics.

As part of the 1992 International Community College Chair Survey, Seagren et al. (1994) examined whether the academic program area influences the respondents' perspectives on job dimensions. Four program areas with the greatest number of survey responses were analyzed: Liberal Arts & Sciences, Nursing & Allied Health, Business Administration & Accounting, and General Studies. Differences appear in 14 of 28 identified clusters. The greatest differences are attributed to either the liberal arts or the nursing and allied health chairs.

The chairs of departments of liberal arts and sciences are more likely to disagree with or view as

unimportant items in eight clusters (Seagren et al., 1994, p. 108):

- Beliefs about mission and access
- Leader role
- External tasks
- Planning tasks
- External relations challenges
- Technology challenge
- Financial challenges
- Internal accountability challenges

Seagren et al. conclude that “these educational traditionalists view the community college similar to chairs who have not been exposed to organizations outside of education, and clearly have a more focused view of their roles” (1994, p. 109). The authors also note that the belief cluster includes items related more specifically to the occupational/technical area and the preparation of students for jobs, which may have accounted for the differences as well.

Internal Tasks and Administrative Skills and Leadership had higher importance for the nursing and allied health chairs than for the other program chairs. They disagree more than any other group on items related to *Curriculum Challenges*. Across all groups, the responses are neutral to disagree for the cluster related to *Program Quality Challenge*.

According to Seagren et al., “the survey findings demonstrate that all chairs do not think in similar fashion nor speak with one voice,

particularly within the heterogeneous community college culture” (1994, p. 110). The authors suggest that too often the organizational structures within community colleges are created out of organizational convenience rather than pedagogical affinity or commonality of mission. As a result several factors, including the leadership style required, are altered.

Walvoord (2000) refers to “a substantial body of research” which establishes that departments differ based on multiple factors related to disciplinary paradigm, knowledge, and methodology (p. 26). A range of variables produces the departmental differences. These include attributes related to the faculty such as educational values, faculty attitudes, teaching styles, and disciplinary concepts of learning and knowing. Institutional and departmental size and mission also influence departments.

Preferences for a simple classification scheme and the homogeneous perception of these positions may account for misunderstandings held of the chair. Clarification of work roles and the expectations held by faculty, colleagues, and senior administration are necessary for the department chair to function effectively.

Conclusion

Leaders in two-year colleges have been described as a unique body of educational practitioners. Although traits found in community college leaders are common to all leadership roles—both within and outside of education—other leadership elements are distinct and singular because of the special nature of the two-year institution and its responsibilities.

Chairs “constitute a body of leadership and influence that has the potential to drive change ... too often ... overlooked as valuable resources” (Lucas, 1994, p. 18). A review of the literature suggests that research specific to departmental leadership in the community college tends to view chairs as a homogeneous group. Additionally, much of the literature concentrates on the roles, tasks, and demographic characteristics of the departmental chair position, elements that may not be fully representative of the position in all cases. Faculty development, student learning, curriculum design, organizational structure, and mission all distinguish the unique diversity of leadership for community college chairs.

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