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Department Heads as Faculty Developers: Six Case Studies

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Faculty development programs present institutions of higher education with opportunities to keep faculty current and to build excellence from within. One promising and economical approach to faculty development builds on the current institutional structure by working through first-line managers in higher education, the academic department chairperson. Because most faculty find that their immediate concerns and involvement in the institution are through their departments (Dressel, 1981), department heads are in a pivotal position to encourage, support and recognize growth and development activities of their faculty.

The purpose of this study was to identify behaviors and practices used by academic department chairpersons to enhance faculty professional growth and development in teaching, research, and service roles. While department heads acknowledge their responsibility for the enhancement of faculty growth and development, they are often poorly prepared to assume this role (Boice, 1985). Most department chairs are promoted to these positions through the academic ranks with little or no leadership training and without a clear understanding of the skills needed to manage and facilitate faculty and staff growth. Knight and Holen contend that this inexperience “intensifies the need for information concerning the behavior characteristics of department chairpersons who are perceived to be effective” (1985, p. 685).

To what extent is the department head responsible for the development of faculty? Researchers have acknowledged faculty development as a legitimate function of the department head (Bragg, 1980; McLaughlin, Montgomery, & Malpass, 1975; Smart & Elton, 1976) and even a

preferred role (McLaughlin et al., 1975). Tucker (1984) recognized the importance of chairperson involvement in the development of faculty and identified three approaches department heads might use as faculty developers: the "caretaker," the "broker," and the "developer." The "caretaker" recognizes a need but feels it is the responsibility of the faculty member. The "broker" makes faculty aware of available development services and encourages faculty participation. The "developer" actively assists faculty members grow and develop professionally. Regardless of the approach used, the department chair's involvement in the development of faculty is a recognized function of his/her role. The more aggressive approaches (i.e., "broker" or "developer") are the preferred methods and will likely yield the best results.

Participants

Thirty male academic department chairpersons from ten North Central Region Land-Grant Colleges of Agriculture participated in this study. College of Agriculture deans and chairpersons from each of the 10 institutions identified three chairs who excelled at assisting faculty professionally. Chairpersons whose names appeared most often on the lists were selected for telephone interviewing. Deans and chairs at the ten participating colleges identified sixty-one chairpersons. The number identified at each college ranged from four to ten. Of the thirty chairpersons selected for interviewing, twenty-three were identified by both deans and chairpersons. The remaining seven were identified only by chairs.

Results

Preliminary Information about Chairpersons

Chairpersons selected for interviewing headed departments ranging in size from 11 to 69 members with a mean of 30 members. The chairs had served from two to 26 years. Forty-three percent reported prior administrative experience, most commonly serving as department head, program head, or research project director. Thirty percent of the department heads had gained administrative experience in a field other than education. Although department heads reported using various methods of training for their roles, most administrative behaviors were learned by the "trial and error" method and from interaction with other department heads.

Behaviors Used for Faculty Development

Participants in this study were asked to focus on one faculty member who had grown professionally over the last few years, identifying how they had assisted him or her. It was assumed these “developer” department heads (Tucker, 1984) would perform specific behaviors to enhance faculty growth and development.

The case studies which follow provide evidence of a behavior pattern used by effective chairs to assist “troubled” faculty. From the identification of a problem to the implementation of an appropriate action plan, department heads offered support and encouragement to develop new faculty and revitalize the “dozers.” On the whole, chairpersons were convinced that many potential problems could be averted by frequent interaction and continual monitoring of faculty performance.

Several of the specific cases reported by the effective chairs were of new faculty or tenured unproductive faculty exhibiting various degrees of difficulty in their positions as exemplified by unsatisfactory performance in their teaching and/or research assignments or the presence of student/faculty conflict. In general, problems with new faculty were addressed early and often resolved through frequent, frank discussion between the chairperson and faculty member. Several of the established faculty discussed by chairs appeared to be experiencing job difficulty due to changing interests or professional goals often complicated by a dynamic environment. Others, whose responsibilities had remained unchanged for a number of years, were approaching “burn out.” Although chairpersons identified these faculty as their “major frustration,” they also characterized this group as their “principal challenge.” Generally, by building on the strengths of the faculty member and providing encouragement and support, help was prescribed or appointments adjusted to effect the appropriate change in faculty behavior. Analysis of the interview responses indicate that the effective chairs did, indeed, perform particular behaviors in their efforts to enhance the professional growth and development of faculty as reflected in the six case studies presented here.

Case Study #1: “Front Line Troops”

One “freshly minted PhD” with an extremely good academic record was described by his chairperson as “a little arrogant,” and this was impeding the faculty member’s effectiveness with students and colleagues. This behavior was especially detrimental in the classroom, and the department head targeted it for change. The department chair described two strategies which enabled him to “confront the issue straight on.” First, he

manages the department in such a way that there is a tone of “trust and openness and confidence on the part of all faculty.” Second, he views the faculty as the “front line troops” and serves the faculty “by providing them the environment, the resources, what they need to get the job done.” Within this helpful environment, the chair talked with the faculty member directly about the situation.

We didn’t beat around the bush....We just sat down and chatted about it. Then the question is, what can we do to effectuate some change? It turns out that there were on-campus and off-campus training programs. One of them dealt with teacher effectiveness; the other dealt more with interpersonal relationships. So we agreed that it would be a good thing to take some time and money and do some of those things.

In addition to identifying and supporting these faculty development opportunities, the department chairperson visited with the faculty member on a regular basis. The department head continued:

We chatted about how things were going and what else needed to be done to improve the situation. Over the next couple of years, those student evaluations began to turn around pretty dramatically.

At the same time, the chair did not ignore the individual’s research responsibility which was 50% of his appointment. While effecting change in the teaching area, the chair supported his research program by limiting his committee assignments, providing resources for a graduate assistant, and allocating sufficient operating money. This young man is now a productive, tenured associate professor.

Case Study #2: “Talking to Young Faculty”

A similar situation was described by another department chair who hired an “extremely bright” individual with a “fairly large ego.” From the outset, the department chair anticipated possible problems, and during a six-year period, there were some conflicts between the professor and a graduate student. The department chair first identified two major factors that were creating this behavior: the faculty member’s “aggressive nature” and his “inexperience.” This administrator’s approach is based upon the “problems don’t solve themselves” philosophy. Thus, once the problem and causes had been identified, the department head initiated a plan to effect the appropriate change in both faculty and graduate student behavior. He first sat down with the faculty member and discussed the situation. Next, the student involved was counseled by the department

head, and finally, both the faculty member and student were brought together. There were several sessions, and through continuous dialogue, the conflict was resolved. The graduate student remained and completed his program, and the major professor grew as a result. The department head summarized his approach:

Communicate, listen, avoid taking sides, be fair to both sides in a situation like that. At the same time, there may be a desired outcome.... You have to counsel in that direction. It's different with each faculty member, but particularly it's a developmental process that really never ends.

Case Study #3: "Publication Productivity and Shifts in Resources"

Another case shared by one chair involved a faculty member who was three years toward tenure when the chair arrived. In the process of acquainting himself with his new staff, the department head became aware of this particular individual's difficulty performing all the functions that the job description demanded. Specifically, his performance in research was inadequate. There were no publications and "some real questions about whether this individual was going to be tenured in the department." The department head assessed the situation:

I was not familiar with the individual before I came.... I spent some time visiting with him and others who were knowledgeable about the situation. What were the limitations? Why was he having problems with research?

The department head investigated and identified two major causes restricting productivity: limited resources and a very heavy teaching load. Once identified, these problems were addressed from several directions. First, the department head talked with the faculty member about the importance of research and publications. He questioned the individual about his unpublished PhD thesis and offered encouraging suggestions on where the thesis research might be published. The chair identified specific journals "that would be out reasonably quickly since the tenure decision was coming up and journals which are more important from the standpoint of the promotion and tenure committee." In addition, the chair asked the faculty member's former major professor to encourage him to get the data written up for publication.

Next, the department chair shifted resources in order to provide the faculty member time to fulfill his research responsibilities:

I made sure that the individual got a graduate research assistant assigned to him...a research technologist on a half-time basis...who could really do the work and wouldn't require a lot of training or close supervision. In addition, I gave him more time to do research by relieving him of a major teaching assignment for one semester. I got another faculty member to pick up that load for a semester so he'd have about an eight-month period where he could intensively work on research and try to improve productivity.

Finally, the chair supported this individual by continuing to provide adequate salary increases and a peer mentoring situation. The department head assessed the faculty member's progress:

The individual has developed, I think, a good research program, has two graduate students working with him right now and still has the technologist, will probably get a visiting scientist working with him in the not too distant future....I think the program is certainly moving in the right direction. He has published and continues to be interested in publishing....I continue to watch the situation. I can't see any further problems.

When asked if he would do anything differently if he were faced with the situation today, the department head commented:

I guess if I were doing it again, I would have moved sooner. Maybe I took too long to assess the situation, or I assumed I didn't have the flexibility that I eventually found. I was trying to decide, during the first year I was here, whether it was our problem or the individual's problem. Eventually it was clear to me that it was our problem. We just hadn't provided the resources that were needed to give the individual a fighting chance....I took the responsibility for the situation.

Case Study #4: "Extension Appointment"

The necessity of matching the position to the faculty member's skills was illustrated in one case involving a tenured professor who held a research and teaching appointment in a large department (more than 15 FTE). The individual had been in the department nine years when the current department head arrived.

In the process of acquainting himself with his new staff, it became clear to the department head that the faculty member was neglecting his research responsibility. The situation had deteriorated to the point where the experiment station director had communicated to the department head that he lacked confidence in this faculty member's ability to conduct

a successful research program. The department head described the situation:

He was known for his excellent teaching....The undergraduates really love him, but his appointment was fifty percent research and he just wasn't getting any research done....With each individual I see what they are doing, what their responsibilities are, and what they want to do and how it fits into the overall program. So I counseled with him, of course, and encouraged him....I suggested that we build on his strengths. That's the role I've taken with all my faculty. In this case, his appointment was the critical thing.

The individual had worked effectively with industry in the state, and the department head chose to build on these strengths. His appointment was adjusted to reflect his abilities; the faculty member now carries a teaching/extension appointment and is a productive member of the department. Although the department head emphasized the importance of counseling and offering frequent encouragement, he suggested that in this case, the solution was seeing that the job description was suited to the person.

The key I think is the job description. Be sure the job description is suited to the persons and get the people doing what the job description says....Then, get the support for them; try to facilitate their work, and try not to put roadblocks in front of them.

Case Study #5: "Incentive Money"

Another case involved two faculty members in one department who were described by the new department head as "two people who were in danger of floating off the rest of their careers without doing too many new things." The department head attempted to break this pattern and "get them thinking about something new." Extensive counseling ensued, and then the department head tried an unorthodox approach.

I went to the dean and asked for a special salary allocation for both of them. Then, independently, I told them that the dean gave it to me because I had faith in them and that I was giving it to them even though I didn't think they had earned it yet; but because I thought they would earn it.

In addition, the department head worked with both faculty to help them set priorities. When asked if this approach helped turn things around, the department head described the outcome:

I'm batting 500. One did. One didn't. So the one who didn't continues to be a problem that I'm concerned about every day. We don't have complete success.

Case Study #6: "Redirection of Burned-Out Faculty"

Another situation involved a tenured full professor with a teaching and research appointment who had been a member of a small department (15 or less FTE) for 20 years. Because of his expertise in biometrics, he was in constant demand for assistance in research design and analysis of data in addition to his normal duties. This faculty member had been identified as one of the better teachers doing an excellent job at the beginning level reaching between 150 and 200 students per year. The department head discussed the problem:

About four years ago it became apparent that I had a staff member who was approaching the burn out stage. He was involved not only with the students that were in his classes, but he was involved on a consultation basis with many graduate students and other personnel. He just couldn't say no. As a result, his performance in the research area was definitely being adversely impacted.

After assessing the situation, the department head took action:

I wrote a formal memo to him indicating that I thought his performance was declining—that we either needed to revamp his research or begin looking at some other areas that were high priority statewide. I made some suggestions for redirection. I was looking at introducing him to a new area that might rejuvenate his interest. He wrote me a formal letter back indicating he liked what I had to offer, but he felt burned out and needed to do something before he would be competent enough to undertake a new research area.

At that point, the chair and faculty member started talking about possible alternatives. The chair recommended that he take a year in which he had just a half-time appointment. During this period he would meet his classes, but the rest of the time would be his. At the direction of the chair, he severed many of the commitments on campus and cut back on committee assignments and consulting. He restricted his consultations in the area of biometrics to students in this department. In addition, he did some reading in the new area and identified colleagues at other universities who were currently working in the proposed redirected area. He made some personal visits to labs on his own time and money and was a departmental representative to other types of meetings that would be

profitable for him in his reorientation and redirection. The department head continued:

I carried the remaining part of his old research project for about a year and a half before we phased out our commitment in that area. I sat in on a few of his classes that year to monitor....After a half dozen of these unannounced visits, I was perfectly satisfied that I'd made the right decision. I continue to monitor his commitments very closely, and today, I have an extremely productive scientist. He no longer feels burned out. He has found that he can say no. His teaching has held up. He's now publishing.

When asked if there were other things that he might have done to assist this person, the department head concluded that he could have used the conventional route of the straight leave of absence. In fact, the faculty member and the department head discussed that possibility, but the individual felt he wanted to keep his class commitments. This and other considerations led the department head to propose the more unorthodox "leave."

Summary

The purpose of this study was to identify behaviors and practices used by effective department chairpersons to enhance faculty professional growth and development in teaching, research, and service roles. The approaches taken by department chairpersons were illustrated through reporting a series of case studies from the North Central Region Land-Grant Colleges of Agriculture.

Although there can be no precise formula which is guaranteed to work in every situation, the case studies provided evidence of a pattern of behavior used by chairs to assist "troubled" faculty. The administrators' approach was based on the "problems don't solve themselves" philosophy. A common thread in each case study was that department heads used an anticipatory approach to identify potential problems. This was accomplished through frequent interaction with faculty and by continually monitoring faculty performance. Specific areas where change was needed were targeted; then the chair worked with the faculty member to initiate a plan of action. By building on the strengths of faculty and providing encouragement and support, adjustments were made to effect the appropriate change in faculty behavior. Chairs sometimes used nontraditional solutions to faculty problems such as the "unorthodox leave." They encouraged faculty to make shifts and pursue new areas of interest, and

provided incentives (i.e., special salary allocation, additional operating money) to facilitate such changes. From the early identification of a problem to the implementation of an appropriate and often innovative action plan, department heads supported both new faculty and “dozers.” The anticipatory and then proactive approach proved successful in most instances.

Limitations of the Study

The implications of the findings combined with the limitations of the study suggest a need for further research in several areas. These needs relate primarily to the training and support of academic department chairpersons and include implications for institutional policy and practice.

The sample in this study was restricted to chairs from ten of the twelve North Central Region Land-Grant Colleges of Agriculture and may not be representative of all department chairpersons. Research could be expanded to include chairpersons from other land-grant and non-land-grant institutions, both public and private. College of Agriculture deans and chairpersons identified chairs who had excelled at assisting faculty professionally. The researcher could have collected a “control” sample of randomly sampled chairs for comparison. In addition, the study was limited to the identification of behaviors chairs used to assist “troubled” faculty. The research could have queried the formerly “troubled” faculty for their evaluation of the redirection process. Finally, chairs who did not participate in this study could have been asked to critique the case studies to access the probability of their general applicability.

Recommendations

Although much has been accomplished in the university setting in meeting the evolving faculty development needs through centralized faculty development programs, some faculty needs could also be addressed within the academic unit. Academic department chairpersons, as first-line managers in higher education, are in a pivotal position to encourage, support, and recognize the growth and development activities of their faculty.

The results of this study suggest that chairpersons’ effectiveness as faculty developers could be enhanced by stronger institutional support. In this regard, faculty development professionals, deans, and other administrators can assist chairpersons in their efforts to enhance the professional development of faculty. This assistance can be accomplished in

several ways. First, institutions could select academic department heads based as much on their management qualifications as on their reputations as scholars. Next, the development of pre-service and in-service training directed toward faculty development and other issues confronting academic department chairs is warranted. New chairperson orientation focusing on human resource management and involving deans, vice chancellors, and experienced department heads is also suggested. In this regard, the faculty development expert can be instrumental in the development of effective leadership training programs for academic chairs.

Finally, chairpersons should be evaluated for their efforts to foster the professional development of faculty. Recognition of these efforts would demonstrate to both faculty and chairpersons the value that the institution places on faculty members and their professional growth and development.

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