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ABSTRACT

This document describes the findings from a survey conducted to compare the middle-level managers, department, and unit chairs and heads in Alabama's two-year colleges with those identified in the National Community College Chair Academy Survey of 1994. In particular, the study was designed to note differences or similarities between the national population of department chairs and those in the politically charged atmosphere of Alabama's two-year colleges. The questionnaire contained 10 demographic questions and 20 questions relative to the roles and tasks of the department chair position. A total of 114 questionnaires were mailed to Alabama administrators; the response rate was 70%. Findings include: (1) 60% of the department chairs in Alabama were male, 80% were over 45 years of age, and nearly 50% had more than 20 years experience in the community college as a faculty member; (2) less than half of the chairs (40%) had held their current position between one and five years, and prior work experience was closely divided between experience in K-12 school administration (50%), business and industry work (59%), and university of professional school experience (41%); and (3) despite modest differences in mean ratings on all items, the Alabama chairs identified three of the same top five roles and tasks as the most important in their work: planning, creating a positive work environment, and information dissemination. (EMH)

Academic Leaders in Alabama Community Colleges:

Roles and Tasks of Department Chairs

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Running Head: Alabama Department Chairs

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The department chair position in 2-year colleges has been identified as central in a web of administrative confusion and activity (Miller & Seagren, 1994). Instead of being faced with the traditional challenges of faculty and administrators, 2-year college chairs must also operate within the framework of curricular and technical advisory boards, significant numbers of part-time faculty, adult students who require greater accountability from academic programs, and a wide variety of individually prepared faculty members. These challenges set the chairperson apart from others who have direct reporting lines and well-defined categories of responsibilities and tasks.

The State of Alabama represents a particularly acute paradigm for department chairs, as the historical foundation of the 2-year college system is deeply rooted in the political negotiations of state politicians, governors, and legislative bodies. Katsinas (1995) in particular noted these unique characteristics of the Alabama 2-year college system, attributing much of the growth to former Governor George Wallace's campaigns and attempts to develop a political stronghold through creating and staffing 2-year colleges with political allies.

Over 30 years after Governor Wallace's departure from the state political scene, the community and junior college system continues to find difficulty in identifying role and mission clarity, in addition to the large number of colleges which occasionally compete for scarce resources, students, and faculty.

The current study was conducted to compare the middle-level managers in Alabama 2-year colleges, department and unit chairs and heads, with those identified in the National Community College Chair Academy survey of 1994 (Seagren, et al, 1994). In particular, the study was designed to note differences or similarities between the national population of department chairs and those in the politically charged atmosphere of Alabama 2-year colleges.

Procedures

The instrument employed for the study was a survey questionnaire. Permission was requested and granted from the National Community College Chair Academy to use a survey previously incorporated into a study conducted by the Academy in cooperation with the Center for the Study of Higher and Postsecondary Education at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. The questionnaire included 10 demographic questions and 20 questions relative to the roles and tasks of the department chair position. During the process of assembling the survey, time required for completion of the instrument was a factor and it was considered advisable to hold the time necessary for survey completion to between 5 and 10 minutes. A 1-to-5 Likert-type scale (1=Very Important; 3=Undecided; 5=Not Important) was used for the scoring of each question on the roles and tasks section, allowing for ease in data tabulation and analysis.

A list of department chairs and heads in Alabama community colleges was obtained from the State Department of Postsecondary Education, and surveys were mailed to the total population. A total of 114 surveys were mailed along with a personalized cover letter and response envelope. Within the first 2 weeks, 69 surveys were returned, and a follow-up mailing produced another 11 responses for a final response rate of 70% (n=80).

Findings

From the demographic information reported, it was revealed that 60% of the department chairs in Alabama were male, 80% were over 45 years of age, and nearly 50% had over 20 years experience in the community college as a faculty member. Under half of the chairs (40%) had held their current position between 1 and 5 years, and prior work experience was closely divided between experience in K-12 school administration (50%), business and industry work (59%), and university or professional school experience (41%). Just under half of the respondents (45%) held a doctoral degree and just over half (52%) held at least a masters degree. The academic units were primarily comprised of 10 or fewer full-time faculty (70%), and nearly an equal number (58%) reported 10 or fewer part-time faculty.

The roles and tasks identified in the survey were clustered into three thematic categories, including student centered issues, faculty management issues, and administrative functions

(see Table 1). Using a multiple Analysis of Variance procedure, no significant differences were revealed on the ratings of these items by prior work experience (f-value 3.15), age (f-value 6.47), or faculty experience in 2-year colleges (f-value 6.47).

When compared with the international and national data collected by Seagren, et al (1994), Alabama community college chairs were found to be very similar in their mean ratings of the different roles and tasks identified (see Table 2). Despite modest differences in mean ratings on all items, the Alabama chairs identified three of the same top five roles and tasks as the most important in their work. These included planning, creating a positive work environment, and information dissemination. Both sets of chairpersons also rated the two tasks of recruiting students and helping students register as the least important in the chair's role.

Discussion

Community college chairs involved in this study clearly indicated the need for attention to information dissemination, planning, and developing and maintaining a positive work environment. On the surface, these issues appear topical in nature and reinforce Seagren's findings. On a deeper level, however, these activities are reflective of the growing need of middle-level managers in higher education to obtain additional professional development while serving on the job. For example, the process of information dissemination relates not only to how to communicate with the highly specialized professorate, but also

makes reference to the skills needed for working with advisory boards and external agencies. The surge in attention to technology, similarly, places a new strain on the chair position, requiring this leader position to be knowledgeable and pervasive in the managerial uses of technology.

Study findings indicated that the issues related to management were of most important to chairs in Alabama. In light of recent legislation in the state mandating articulation between 2- and 4-year colleges, the administrative related tasks and duties have become even more important. Again, this finding places an increasing responsibility on graduate programs and professional associations to do more than present research and cases of best practice, but to delve into the management and marketing topics typically dealt with in certification programs, and to work harder to teach these skills to eager department chairs.

By reaffirming the previous international and national study of the chair position, the current study also suggests that despite a controversial political history, 2-year colleges in Alabama face the same challenges as those in other parts of the United States and world. This finding alone presents tremendous opportunities for the chairs who participated in the current study, as well as other chairs in states who perceive themselves to be isolated from national norms, to embrace national movements at developing networks and linkages among practicing chairpersons.

References

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Table 1

Mean Ratings of Roles and Tasks of Alabama Department Chairs

Cluster	Item	Mean	SD
<u>Student Centered Issues</u>			
	Advise and counsel students	1.65	.71
	Help students register	2.09	.98
	Recruit students	2.14	.83
<u>Administrative Functions</u>			
	Planner	1.33	.52
	Update curriculum and courses	1.58	.74
	Evaluator	1.68	.75
	Evaluate faculty performance	1.70	.76
	Delegator	1.74	.68
	Resource allocator	1.81	.81
	Prepare unit budgets	1.96	1.03
<u>Management Issues</u>			
	Information dissemination	1.25	.47
	Create a positive work environment	1.36	.58
	Schedule classes	1.39	.68
	Communicate information from administration to unit faculty	1.39	.58

Table 1, continued

Mean Ratings of Roles and Tasks of Alabama Department Chairs

Cluster	Item	Mean	SD
	Provide feedback to faculty	1.53	.63
	Recruit and select faculty	1.55	.74
	Motivator	1.63	.66
	Assign faculty responsibilities	1.76	.75
	Mentor	2.00	.95

Table 2

Comparison of Alabama Data and the National and International
Chair Data

Role/Task	National Data Mean (SD) N=3,300	Alabama Data Mean (SD) N=80
Motivator	1.49 (.66)	1.63 (.66)
Information disseminator	1.50 (.63)	1.28 (.47)
Resource allocator	1.89 (.83)	1.81 (.81)
Evaluator	1.95 (.87)	1.68 (.75)
Mentor	1.89 (.83)	2.00 (.95)
Delegator	1.84 (.76)	1.74 (.68)
Planner	1.37 (.55)	1.33 (.52)
Create a positive work environment	1.31 (.56)	1.36 (.58)
Schedule classes	1.64 (.95)	1.39 (.68)
Update curriculum and courses	1.58 (.76)	1.58 (.74)
Recruit and select faculty	1.48 (.76)	1.55 (.74)
Assign faculty responsibilities	1.80 (.88)	1.76 (.75)
Evaluate faculty performance	1.82 (.96)	1.70 (.76)
Provide feedback to faculty	1.53 (.71)	1.53 (.63)
Recruit students	2.49 (1.23)	2.14 (.83)
Advise and counsel students	1.86 (.94)	1.65 (.71)

Table 2, continued

Comparison of Alabama Data and the National and International
Chair Data

Role/Task	National Data Mean (SD) N=3,300	Alabama Data Mean (SD) N=80
Help students register	2.62 (1.29)	2.09 (.98)
Prepare unit budgets	1.71 (.93)	1.84 (.81)
Manage facilities and equipment	2.32 (1.13)	1.96 (1.03)
Communicate information from administration to unit faculty	1.49 (.66)	1.39 (.58)



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