## Faculty Response to Department Leadership: Strategies for Creating More Supportive Academic Work Environments

*By Michael T. Miller and John W. Murry, Jr.*

**Abstract**

Having a strong, positive departmental chair is critical to enhancing and assuring faculty performance and student learning. Poor leadership, however, can result in increased faculty turn over, poor teaching and research performance, and even the discouragement of students from enrolling. The current study explored response strategies by faculty members about how to most effectively work with poor departmental leaders. Using a three-round Delphi survey, study results clustered response strategies into three categories, including strategies that force the chair to recognize that there is a problem, using formal authority to change departmental leadership, and relying on professional development to change a chair's behaviour.

### How Faculty Respond to Poor Departmental Leadership

The role of department chair is critical for higher education institutions. Roach (1976) estimated that as many as 90% of all academic decisions made on campus are decided by department chairs. Carpenter-Hubin and Snover (2013) more recently affirmed the importance of the chair position, and particularly noted that the individual in this role has the difficult task of reporting to a more senior administrator, typically an academic dean, while simultaneously reporting to the faculty members who are being supervised. Creswell, Wheeler, Seagren, Egyle, and Beyer (1990) referred to this dual reporting as similar to the Roman god Janus, who had two faces, one pointing in each direction, being pulled in two directions.

The power of the department chair to create a culture and environment for faculty to be successful has been well documented (Al-Karni, 1995). The department chair, sometimes called a department head and in other cases referred to as a director, can create a culture of appreciation, innovation, commitment, and feelings of self-worth for the faculty members as they take on a broad variety of sometimes disparate activities. And while the chair can build an environment for success, the chair can also be a barrier to positive performance, and poor chair performance can result in high levels of faculty turnover (O'Meara, Lounder, & Campbell, 2014), disinvestment, unsatisfactory teaching, poor faculty productivity in research and grant writing, and less of a commitment to students. And although the chair's performance may not directly cause certain behaviours such as these, the chair's performance has been strongly correlated with them (Czech & Forward, 2010).

As Carpenter-Hubin and Snover (2013) and notably Gmelch (2011), have stressed (in addition to that of Creswell, Wheeler, Seagren, Egly, & Beyer, 1990), the department chair is typically supervised and evaluated by a more senior academic leader. There are instances where a dean's perspective may be out of alignment with departmental faculty members,

and a chair's performance for whatever reason may be unsatisfactory, yet the individual may remain in the chair position. This may be a result of organizational dissonance in which the dean and faculty goals are incongruent, or it may be that the chair is ill-equipped or ineffective in the role (Al-Karni, 1995; Czech & Forward, 2010).

There have been multiple reports in popular literature of unsatisfactory behaviour by department chairs, sometimes based on the chair's perspective of what needs to happen, and sometimes based on unclear roles, expectations, or even resources (Majeski, 2005; Czech & Forward, 2010). Although an institution primarily relies on senior academic leadership to align performance with expectations, there is also an important role for departmental faculty to play.

The broad standards advanced by the AAUP for faculty involvement in governance support the idea that faculty should be consulted for the evaluation of academic administrators. For a variety of reasons, including fear of retribution, faculty members may be hesitant to articulate their true perceptions about chair performance. Therefore, the purpose for conducting the study was to identify and describe how faculty in an academic department respond to what they perceive as poor or bad leadership or performance by their department chairs. The intent of this exploration was to then construct an inventory of strategies that faculty can draw upon, or other academic leaders can refer to, in dealing with departmental leadership problems.

### Background of the Study

The department chair position borders between providing the essential management of operating an academic department to providing the charisma and emotion that accompanies leadership practices. This balance between two commonly disparate characteristics is typically untrained, and there is a dearth of professional development for department chairs (Al-Karni, 1995; Schloss & Cragg, 2013; Seagren, Creswell, & Wheeler, 1993; Tucker, 1992; Wheeler, Seagren, Becker, Kinley, Mlinke, & Robson, 2008). Much of the training that is available for chairs is through professional associations, and these tend to either focus on broad leadership characteristics or problem-focused episodes such as preparing for accreditation visits or dealing with difficult people. Rarely do training programs capture the unique challenges of different academic departments that range from community-based partnerships to the culture of scientific research laboratories.

A procedural challenge for department chairs is understanding the reporting structure and lines of authority for the position. Ultimately the position is responsible to an academic director or dean, and subsequently the position is relegated to enforcing the priorities or demands of this upper level administration. The position is unique, however, in that elements of leadership are also a necessity, as the chair position must find ways to encourage engagement and effective activity of faculty members. The chair has a degree of "free will" to impose standards, create programs, and develop faculty members, and in this regard evaluation that recognizes the local level of work is also a necessity (Bowman, 2002).

The historically rich literature base concerning the department chair

provides several domains of understanding of the chair position, including traits and characteristics, challenges and stressors, and work performance. These studies represent a broad spectrum of research studies that range from multi-national (Carroll, 1991; Al-Karni, 1995; Wolverton, Gmelch, Wolverson, & Sarros, 1999) examinations to single institution or discipline-related studies (examples include Majeski, 2005; Kamath, Meier, & Rao, 2004). Research consistently notes that the position is challenged by role ambiguity. Such inconclusive agreement on position responsibilities can lead to both incomplete training and evaluation and highlights the difficulty of hiring the academic professional with the best chances for success in the position.

As the department chair determines the culture of an academic unit, the chair is in the unique position to be a critical force in retaining faculty members or causing them to leave, highlighting the need for chairs to have the disposition and skills most necessary for their and their faculty members' success (O'Meara, Lounder, & Campbell, 2014). This also includes their ability to assess their faculty and to develop meaningful response strategies to the performance of faculty members (Kang & Miller, 2001).

Carroll's (1991) nearly 25-year-old study of department chair progression is perhaps the most complete of those describing the faculty ascension to the chair position. He reported that most chairs are hired from internal, tenured faculty members (about two-thirds of faculty were internal hires) and that it is very uncommon to have someone come from outside of higher education to assume a chair position. Carroll also classified chair-hiring as being either faculty—oriented or administratively oriented, with over half of all chairs claiming that their orientation led toward a more faculty-driven and focused appointment.

The guiding assumption found in the literature is that a department chair with certain characteristics and abilities can do a better job in facilitating the work of the academic department, and these outcomes might be better teaching, more productive research products, and a higher degree of student satisfaction with their educational experiences. Conversely, department chairs who are either poorly trained or lack the disposition to be effective chairs might find in their departments a higher level of faculty turnover, non-productive faculty, poor student learning reports, and an adversarial culture of incivility among fellow faculty members. Additionally, poorly managed departments may find themselves not in compliance with either institutional policies or state/provincial and federal laws.

Although not specific to the department chair position, Rose, Shuck, Twyford, and Bergman (2015) described the consequences of what they termed the "dysfunctional leader." They reported that up to nearly four out of ten employees working in the United States work for someone defined as dysfunctional. They used a working definition of dysfunctional as a set of behaviours that include someone who "places burdensome structures in the path of progress, intentionally or unintentionally violates psychological contracts, and generally treats his or her employees with a disrespectful approach" (p. 2). Their recommendation was to find a way to encourage "positive psychological climate[s]" (p. 21) as well as the need for strong

training in both management and leadership to address the behaviours of leaders with responsibility for the work of others.

## Research Methods

As an exploratory study, the Delphi survey technique was selected for use. The Delphi technique is an exploratory methodology that allows for consensus development among geographically diverse individuals who have some expertise or experience with a subject or phenomenon. First developed by the RAND Corporation, the Delphi has been frequently used in social science research and allows for the identified experts to compare their own experiences, knowledge, and insights to those with similar qualifications, resulting in a high level of consensus on the matter being studied.

In the current study, 15 senior faculty members were selected from five different academic disciplines in the social sciences, and identified for possible participation in the survey but only 11 ultimately completed all three rounds of the survey .(n=4 from communications; n=3 from education; n=2 from social work; n=1 from business; and n=1 from cultural studies). These faculty members were nominated by their provost or vice president of academic affairs, or the administrator's designee, to participate in the study. The common criterion for identification was that each faculty member had experience with a department chair or head who had been determined to perform the chair duties unsatisfactorily. The 15 provosts were identified from the listing of institutions that were categorized as being research intensive or research extensive by the Carnegie Foundation, as these institutions represent perhaps the greatest variety of role breadth, meaning that departments in research active institutions must teach and mentor undergraduate and graduate students while simultaneously conducting research and writing grants. These provosts were identified and contacted to nominate a faculty member in the spring and summer of 2015; data collection began in summer 2015.

One limitation of this type of research is that it relies on expert perception or opinion of a situation and, in this case, faculty members who were asked to rely on their own experiences and perceptions. This procedure limits findings to the extent that they are useful in creating an initial description of strategies that will need to be further vetted and studied. The value of the study, however, is in this initial description.

## Findings

Nomination email messages were sent to the selected provosts who in turn nominated 15 department chairs or heads on their campuses to participate in the study. From this initial group, 11 department chairs indicated that they would participate and four declined. These four individuals' institutions were then re-contacted for an additional nomination. One provost nominated an additional faculty member who agreed to participate, and the remaining three campuses were replaced in the sample. In all three of the replacement campuses, the provost nominated a faculty member who agreed to participate in the study.

In the first round of data collection, 52 strategies were identified by the participating faculty members as ways of responding to poor departmental

leadership. After editing these 52 strategies, however, 34 strategies remained to be rated in the second round of the study. All 15 faculty members responded to the second round of the study, and as shown in Table 1, six strategies were strongly agreed to as effective ways of dealing with a unstisfactory department chair. These six strategies were: build a coalition of faculty to address the matter with the chair (mean 4.9), ignore the chair (mean 4.8), confront the chair about the behaviour (mean 4.6), hire a consultant to review the chair (mean 4.5), hire a consultant to review the department (mean 4.5), and get a group of senior faculty to confront the chair (mean 4.5). These faculty members agreed least with four strategies, including refusing to do what the chair asks (mean 2.4), getting able faculty to cover the chair's deficiencies (mean 2.6), go to the university ombudsperson for help (mean 2.6), and go to the board of trustees for help (mean 2.99).

In the third round of the study, faculty members were then asked to consider group data from round 2 and to rerate each item, changing their response if they were influenced by the group's mean rating, mode, and standard deviation. In the third round, 56 changes were made to 18 different strategies, reflecting roughly four changes of ratings per participant. The rating changes of the 18 strategies resulted higher ratings for 12 strategies and lower ratings for 6 strategies.

Based on the final consensus from faculty who have dealt with poor departmental leadership (shown in Table 1), the top five strategies for dealing with the chair are to build a coalition of faculty to address the matter directly with the chair (mean 4.9), go to the dean to make a change in departmental leadership (mean 4.6), confront the chair every day about his/her behaviour (mean 4.6), hire a consultant to review the department chair (mean 4.6), and get a group of senior faculty to confront the chair (mean 4.6). Conversely, the least agreed upon strategies that would be effective include refusing to do what the chair asks (mean 2.4), get able faculty to cover the chair's deficiencies (mean 2.4), and to go the university ombudsperson for help (mean 2.6).

### Discussion and Implications

Faculty members who participated in the study were able to identify some very specific actions related to how they dealt with or believed poor departmental leadership should be dealt with. Additionally, they agreed or strongly agreed that 14 of these strategies could be effective and tended to disagree with four of the strategies. Some of the items might have been specific to the institutions included in the study and reflect those unique characteristics, such as having a union representative or an institutional ombudsperson. Others might have been culturally relevant to particular institutions, such as the individual who indicated that faculty members should go directly to a board of trustees, an action that might be very appropriate for a certain institution with an open board, but was not broadly seen as a potentially effective strategy. Or, the individual who recommended the action might have some relationship or prior experience with the board, and see this as an appropriate type of reaction.

The strategies that were agreed to as potentially effective fell into several categories. One category was related to getting the chair to see that there was a problem, and was reflected in strategies such as

challenging the chair to justify actions, getting senior faculty to confront the chair, building coalitions of faculty, hiring consultants to review the situation, and simply having a candid conversation about the problems. The next category related to using authority to solve the problem, using a dean or provost to force a change in either the leadership or the behaviour. A third category would be the idea that the chair can change behaviours and leadership style by going to professional development or using team building activities, all of which would require the admission to some extent that the behaviour needed to change. Few of the agreed-upon strategies were negatively confrontational, but this category of responses included actions such as nominating the chair for other positions and ignoring what the chair asked to be done.

Overall, there was some agreement that there are acceptable strategies for confronting and challenging an ineffective departmental leader, and the identification of these strategies is a first step in exploring how faculty can be engaged in determining university administration. In an era of removing faculty from sharing institutional power, these strategies are especially helpful as an illustration that faculty do see a role for themselves in determining their future. None of the strategies were particularly costly or financially dependent, and all of them were within the skill set and realistic possibilities of faculty members, whether tenured or tenure track. There can be consequences to all of the strategies identified, and identifying different role-playing scenarios might be helpful in fine-tuning the list of response strategies to determine their realistic effect.

Although the sample was drawn from research-focused institutions, findings do have some potential applicability to other types of institutions and even community colleges. The strategies identified did not specifically reflect a research-institution bias, and the strategies tended to be more globally reflective of how faculty members interact with administrators. An extension of the study might be to explore institutional complexity and administrative performance.

Future research into unsatisfactory departmental leadership should include not only additional response strategies and recommendations for non-tenured faculty, but should also include an analysis of how the situations evolved and how the individuals were placed into their administrative roles. Correlations between faculty members' input to administrative decisions might be helpful in determining the role of institutional culture in employment decision-making. Additionally, the use of any of these strategies might provide constructive case studies for graduate classes and faculty mediation workshops.

Overall, the study findings demonstrate that faculty members can identify strategies for working with underperforming department chairs, and that many of these strategies are seen as potentially effective, at least by these faculty members. The extent of their effectiveness, however, will be reliant on faculty with intentions that are not personal or petty, and hold the welfare of the department central to their actions.

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