# Creating an Academic Ecosystem Where Chairs Can Thrive: A Call for Action in Postsecondary Institutions

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## Abstract

This study aimed to understand the lived experience of department chairs in a Canadian university context. Guided by phenomenological inquiry, 21 individual interviews of experienced academic chairs were analyzed. Findings focus on the rewards and challenges of the position, advice for professors interested in taking on this role, and the systemic issues that impact change. Results highlight the importance of preparatory training and ongoing institutional support, including the deliberate building of a chair community. This paper includes a call to action which will be of interest to Deans and other senior administrators, faculty leaders, those contemplating the chair role, and those involved with institutional governance.

*Keywords*: academic chair, higher education, Canada, academic administrators

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The quality and well-being of an academic unit is often attributed to the effectiveness of the department chair[1] (Armstrong & Woloshyn, 2017), yet this role is usually assumed with limited preparation or training. Researchers have made calls to improve, support, and implement succession planning (Armstrong & Woloshyn, 2017; Aziz et al., 2005; Bedrow, 2010; Brinkley-Etzkorn & Lane, 2019; Buller, 2012; Weaver et al., 2019; Wolverton et al., 2005), yet perennial issues persist. Motivated by stories of stress and strains, our scholarship team wanted to better understand how professors who take on administrative leadership experience their role. Our research group included four female professors who had either completed, or were completing, a term as chair. Having experiences like many of the participants contributed to our phenomenological analysis and reflection.

Aligned with Ungar's (2013) resiliency theory which emphasizes the relevance of building a resource-filled infrastructure, our analysis identified specific strategies that must be enacted by academic leaders if meaningful change to the academic ecosystem is to occur. Rewards, challenges, and advice from the participants' perspective are highlighted, and we conclude the paper with calls for action.

## Literature Review

The primary responsibilities of university department chairs include governance, faculty affairs, budget and office management, external representation, curriculum development, and course scheduling (Boyko & Jones, 2010; Buller, 2012; Weaver et al., 2019). As the latter authors detail, the chair role is broad and amorphous, resulting in a job description that is ambiguous. "Most incoming chairs have little understanding of these role expectations, task complexities, time demands, and the potential negative impact the role will have on their professional and personal relationships and identities" (Armstrong & Woloshyn, 2017, p. 99). Many job descriptions contain an unrealistic laundry list of tasks, the execution of which is often derailed by urgent requests that require immediate response (Buller, 2012). In addition to functional responsibilities, chairs have the added pressure of creating a healthy departmental environment and maintaining an effective team, while also managing their own research- and teaching-related duties.

Several books aim to assist academic leaders in fulfilling their duties (e.g., Buller, 2012; Gmelch & Miskin, 2011; Lederman et al., 2017; Lees, 2006; Wheeler et al., 2008), and anecdotal stories, blogs, and news articles have added to our collective impression of what the chair role entails. Few empirical studies exist in the literature, and the lived experience of the academic chair has been under-researched, especially in Canada. Notable exceptions include Acker and Millerson

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[1] In Canada, the leader of an academic unit is frequently referred to as the Department Head or Chair. In this paper, we use chair.

(2018) and Armstrong and Woloshyn (2017). We draw from scholarly investigation of middle managers in other contexts with the goal of addressing the gaps in our understanding of the "chair's problem" and the steps required to create resolution. Our study builds on this body of work by adding further Canadian content to the field.

### A Unique Kind of Middle Management

Chairs fit within the middle-management framework because they are faced with competing demands from both department and senior leadership. Department members expect their chair to provide advice, advocacy, and leadership, while administrators require chairs to take a managerial role in advancing institutional agendas. This can be problematic because "chairs are not accorded the institutional power required to effect these externally imposed changes" (Armstrong & Woloshyn, 2017, p. 99). Chairs' leadership is complicated because they typically retain their status as faculty members (Armstrong & Woloshyn, 2017) in what is a temporary leadership role (Acker, 2014).

Bossmann et al. (2016) describe mid-level managers (such as chairs) as particularly challenged as leaders because they are "required both to be a daily supportive and appreciative leader for their workers and to fulfill the requirements of strategic management under constant time and performance pressure" (p. 10). Sherman et al. (2012) have suggested that the more control that leaders have, the less likely they are to experience increased stress and anxiety. Bossmann et al. speculate that higher-level leaders are buffered against the stress of middle management because these senior leaders have greater control over decisions and resources, including agency for delegation, and freedom.

Compared with other sectors, stress is exacerbated in the university context because power is "dispersed among experts enjoying significant autonomy" (Kligyte & Barrie, 2014, p. 160). Kligyte and Barrie (2014) note that universities require "more collaborative and indirect leadership than in other contexts" (p. 158). Leadership among equals requires strong communication skills, confidence, and diplomacy. Academia may also require leaders to have a unique set of social interaction skills to guide colleagues towards attainment of personal, departmental, and institutional goals (Askling & Stensaker, 2002).

Mentorship is also a common expectation of chairs. Results from Wolverton et al. (2005) suggest that new leaders may be naïve to personnel issues, and thus enter the role unprepared for colleagues who "need incredible amounts of nurturing … and motivation" (p. 231). This kind of work requires emotional intelligence (EI) attributes including self-awareness, self-management, empathy, and social skills (Parrish, 2011, 2015). Parrish argues that ongoing professional development to strengthen EI can enhance chair effectiveness, satisfaction, capacity, and sense of accomplishment.

When examining challenges experienced by department chairs, Gmelch and Burns (1993) noted that main sources of stress included time pressures, maintaining disciplinary currency, managing confrontations with colleagues, and responding to organizational demands. These findings were echoed years later by Cipriano and Riccardi's (2010) survey of chairs; more than half of their respondents identified the same five major challenges: managing bureaucracy, limited research time, role stress, uncollegial behaviour of faculty, and unreasonable workload. Researchers exploring the stress level of chairs (Gmelch & Burns,1993; Mintz–Binder, 2014; Wolverton et al., 2005) have consistently urged universities to restructure the role to make it more sustainable (e.g., remove routine paperwork that can be managed by others), and provide tailored training to help chairs to meet their wide range of responsibilities. In another Canadian study of academic chairs, Armstrong and Woloshyn (2017) concluded that these calls remain unanswered. Based on interviews with 10 chairs, their challenges fall under three main headings: *managing the position* (with little preparation for managerial tasks), *managing people* (particularly in high conflict situations), and *managing self* (their own identity and obligations in the role). It seems that little has changed in the past 25 years (Armstrong & Woloshyn, 2017; Gmelch & Burns, 1993; Wolverton et al., 2005).

### Chair Training and Support

To effect change, some researchers have tried to identify the professional development needs of chairs (Armstrong & Woloshyn, 2017; Aziz et al., 2005; Bedrow, 2010; Weaver et al., 2019). Aziz and colleagues (2005) asked chairs to share critical incidents and describe the knowledge, skills, and attributes required for success in those situations. They concluded that because the chair role has such diverse responsibilities, and training time is limited, professional development topics should be prioritized, focusing on those aspects of the job that contribute most to chair success. Specifically, respondents in their study acknowledged that training in policies, budget, and other managerial tasks is a priority early in the chair period. However, they also felt that personnel management was both critical and one of the most difficult areas to learn. Brinkley–Etzkorn and Lane's (2019) findings confirmed that the development of interpersonal skills should be prioritized: "skills and knowledge pertaining to leadership are of greater importance, particularly when it comes to human interactions" (p. 581).

### Purpose of the Study

This study adds to our understanding of the department chair, particularly in the Canadian context. By analyzing the stories of these academic leaders, we intend to create recommendations for individuals, departments, faculties, and university administrative teams that could promote the healthier system called for in the literature. We also hope that this study helps to offer a more holistic image of modern academic work (Floyd & Preston, 2019). This

broader view would foster understanding that professors' contributions in the university extend well beyond research and teaching (Rosewell & Ashwin, 2018).

## Method

### Participants

Participants were drawn from a mid-sized Canadian teaching-focused, undergraduate university. At the time of this study the chair term was 5 years and a maximum of two consecutive terms were permitted. All participants continued with teaching and research responsibilities while serving as chair. Individuals invited to participate included those currently serving as chair with at least 2 years of experience, and former chairs who had completed their term within the past 5 years (*n*=29). Two members of the research team met the criteria and were included in the study. Data from 21 interviews were analyzed, reflecting a response rate of 72%. To protect anonymity of participants, only limited demographic data were collected.

### Data Collection

In the fall of 2018, individual semi-structured interviews based on the following set of 10 questions were conducted to explore narratives of the chair experience:

1. Why/how did you become a department chair?
2. Describe challenging situations and how you managed them.
3. What strategies helped you manage challenges?
4. What has been the effect of being chair on your wellness?
5. How do you define success as a leader and tell about times when you felt successful?
6. What personal qualities helped or hindered your ability to be chair?
7. Do you think your identity has shifted in this role?
8. What does resilience mean to you?
9. What is your advice to incoming and exiting chairs?
10. What suggestions would you give to postsecondary institutions which would help them become more successful places to develop new leaders?

All interviews were recorded, professionally transcribed, and then returned to participants for their review. Additional comments or corrections from the participants were included. Once the transcript was approved by the participant, that data was anonymized and subjected to a multi-phased coding process.

### Analysis

This qualitative methodology was informed by interpretive phenomenology and aimed to uncover the meanings that chairs make of their experiences (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). Following procedures outlined by Koch (1996) and Hahn (2008), including dyad and group coding

processes, raw data from the transcripts was first broken down into discrete meaning units (Level 1 coding). We worked in teams to isolate and identify main ideas (Level 2 coding), and organized them into themes (Level 3 coding), both within individual interviews and across all interviews. To further enhance the validity of this analysis, we invited a general group of faculty to sort the Level 2 codes into themes during a professional development workshop. The interpretive process was extended to look at commonalities and differences among this sample group: making ongoing comparisons between the parts (transcript items) and the whole (the emerging interpretation of the phenomenon). Results were presented to an assembly of academic leaders (including some study participants). Their feedback further informed our analysis. The final phase of this interpretive process involved taking the findings from these interviews and comparing them to the existing literature and models.

## Results

We interviewed 21 chairs (12 males and nine females) and identify their specific quotes below by interview number (e.g., Chair Interview 21 = c21). Content analysis identified three major categories: rewards, challenges, and advice. From these, a clear call to action to build specific supports for chairs emerged.

### Rewards: Achievement, Vision, Purpose, and Personal Growth

As chairs considered their achievements during chairship, degree development and program reviews were highlighted as significant:

> How could we change to make our program better? How do we differentiate ourselves? How are we not as different as we thought? I love doing that and then taking that and applying that to develop into the degree. (c15)
>
> I am proud of the things I did, I am proud of the people I worked with, and it was fun; I enjoyed it. Oh my gosh, how many people get an opportunity to develop a new degree program? You [could] go your whole career and you never get a shot at that. (c21)

Another important source of satisfaction was the opportunity to create a thriving collegial atmosphere and intellectual culture. "Whenever I hear about a student getting a good job somewhere … whenever I see a faculty member getting tenure, I was part of that" (c14). Several participants commented on their skills in mediating and helping colleagues to come to a consensus, "with everyone's opinion being respected" (c11), and "having the backs of my team and … being there to help them have a good work experience" (c20). Another described celebrating colleagues' successes in research and teaching and summed up with, "Okay, great, people are doing what they need to be doing and they are getting what they need, and that, to me, is the most rewarding part of the job" (c18). Some participants also described the reward of

seeing positive changes in themselves: "You kind of start to feel like 'oh, it is not my agenda anymore that is really at the forefront here.' [I'm] not quite so self-centered, I guess!" (c8).

Understanding the university better was another reward. They liked knowing "how the place works" (c8) and noted that "you find out who the people are (c8) when at the table where decisions are made" (c8). While many participants valued the opportunity to develop institutional understanding and organizational skills, they also revealed that the chair role helped them to achieve personal growth. Examples included becoming "measured and mellowing" (c5), "kind" (c15), "more confident" (c12), and learning to be "someone who takes advice, gives advice … accepting disagreements, welcoming change" (c21). Some felt they were less inclined to react excessively and learned to set boundaries regarding time and emotions. Learning to not take things personally and gaining an understanding of other disciplines were some other examples of personal growth: "So when people disagreed with me, my inner self wanted to take it all personally. My brain kicked in and said, 'This isn't personal'" (c17). Another participant said, "I know a little bit more about the disciplinary range of our colleagues and their expertise so I am a little more generous in judging the differences than I might have been before" (c16).

### *Challenges: Conflict, Emotional Labour, and Untenable Workload*

While the rewards were clear, there was also a strong theme that reflected challenges of the position. Most participants claimed the "biggest challenges come from dealing with people" (c10). Some tensions were received by the chair because of their position. For example, "Sometimes people are pissed about something else entirely, but it comes out at the chair" (c6). "As chair you have to deal with a lot of complaints, and you can get drowned in negativity. … The emotional investment makes the job hard" (c18).

Participants described experiences of personal attacks, noting that some colleagues "can be quite aggressive; they want to take you down" (c14). Another said, "I got so that there were certain emails that would pop up in my box and my stomach would do a flip like, 'Do I want to read this?'" (c19). Examples of colleagues' uncivil behaviours included: yelling, intimidating others, and "giving dirty looks … in the hallway" (c12). Some faculty expected the chair to grant privileges such as preferential workload assignment.

When uncivil behaviour was directed at others, the responsibility of helping to resolve conflicts carried emotional weight and required judgment about when to get involved: "Your first instinct is, 'This is unjust and shall not occur on my watch!' and then you start looking and … [it] wasn't quite represented the way it occurred" (c16). Participants described carrying the burden of knowing private information and having a duty to address or report issues: "Discipline issues. Hated it. Absolutely hated it. You had to document things, you had to record things, you had to

shelter your other faculty from these things, other administrators, you had to keep it confidential" (c21). This stress of being caught in the middle—still a member of the faculty and yet simultaneously responsible for administrative duties—was a significant challenge: "It is really hard to be in that leadership role with people and then go back to being their colleague" (c15).

The responsibility of advocating for administrative decisions was also described as a job challenge: "I'm not always making the case that I believe in. … Chairs are often given the job of explaining the decisions made by our leaders, but we are not given enough information to defend the choice" (c6). In these cases, participants again referred to being caught in the middle between administration and faculty: "Every time you make a decision typically there will be some people who are unhappy with it" (c8).

Managing budgets was also a challenge for participants who typically had little or no previous managerial experience. This inexperience contributed to stress and uncertainty. Budget stresses were perceived to be ongoing and emotional: "Budget considerations have been challenging almost every year … with no time to discuss" (c16). Funding is also unpredictable, "Cuts are taxing—we don't always know what's next, … what leadership or government will want" (c18).

A common complaint heard in the interviews was the relentless workload and wide scope of responsibilities: "You would work every day, and I mean you would take the occasional Saturday or Sunday off, but it is always in your mind" (c1). The chair role typically required more than full-time hours and most participants were additionally juggling teaching and research: "I see myself as being a service leader and supporting others' accomplishments and goals, but I am often intentionally putting myself in the background and essentially putting myself second to other priorities" (c7). When faculty go on unexpected leave, the chair was left to pick up the workload: "I ended up having to cover all of [their] courses for the rest of the semester … so that was really, really challenging" (c19).

Participants lacked the time and energy to keep up with academic passions and scholarship and viewed serving in the role as a sacrifice. For example, one participant referenced the "career-killer concept of being an academic chair. I recently looked at the criteria for full professorship and I don't feel like there's any real recognition of the additional workload, just a bit of a nod to leadership and service" (c16).

With respect to compensation, participants said that the chair stipend was minimal compared to the professional and personal costs of the position. Descriptions of personal stress and health threats were also frequently mentioned, including: lack of sleep, limited time for exercise, poor nutrition, high blood pressure, anxiety, limited capacity for family and friendships outside of

work, and an overall lack of balance. Despite all the challenges described by participants, they were also able to offer ideas for improving the experience of future chairs.

### *Advice: Delegation, Management Skills, and Systemic Support*

In light of the negative descriptions related to high stress and heavy workload, we were heartened by the recommendations offered to future chairs. Participants encouraged new chairs to prioritize goal setting, but to keep expectations realistic: "[It's] the whack-a-mole nature of the job. … Seventy-five percent of your job will just be doing the things that come across your desk that are new all the time. … It was very, very helpful to me just to acknowledge I was doing my job when I was doing those things" (c20). Many participants said that their agendas were too lofty at the outset. One recommended that new chairs identify "a plan, a few things you wish to focus on in your tenure. Don't take on everything" (c5). Participants advised being realistic about what could be achieved within the time frame of the chair role: "Remind yourself it is a service role, so even though you may think you are going to do great things now that you are Chair of a department … just remind yourself that it really is a service role: service to the faculty, service to the students, you are serving them. It is not an opportunity for greatness" (c4).

Learning to delegate and discern the talents of staff and faculty was advised: "Disabuse yourself of the notion that you can do everything yourself. … There are skilled folks in your department, colleagues, who are good at stuff that you may not be so good at, and you should use their skills" (c1). Relying upon institutional support from administrative assistants and the Dean was also seen as vital: "I have an outstanding admin who helped keep me on the rails in those things, too" (c13). The development of people management skills was described as integral to feeling successful. "And so for me, success then would be, am I helping individuals to feel part of a collective? And am I helping them feel … they belong here, they are accomplishing something and that they are improving?" (c12). Some participants attributed their success to drawing colleagues together in a common vision: "[I had] some ability to capture the competing views in a room and draw that together and come up with a consensus" (c7).

The importance of having a social support system outside of the university context was emphasized to help nurture other aspects of life and well-being. This included a "vital friend … [someone I] can go and speak to about something good or bad that is happening—personally or professionally" (c18). Participants recommended finding connections beyond workplace and home, "a third place" (c2) such as a faith group or pastime. "I actually make sure I register in things that have absolutely nothing to do with work" (c11).

When recalling their first year, participants described being in survival mode. The initial experience of calendar submissions, workload allocation, course scheduling, tenure evaluations, contract hiring, and other day-to-day management tasks was described as rapid,

confusing, overwhelming, and exhausting. Despite this, many participants advised new chairs to persist through the initial learning curve for subsequent rewards. Toward the midway point, participants reported feeling increased confidence in the daily workings of their position, allowing them to shift to developing initiatives or supporting more critical changes. Midway was described as a time of "finding voice" (c12). The job became "more predictable. I can anticipate when I am going to see student issues or when I am going to see faculty issues. … I am able to … prioritize and do triage a lot of times about what the critical things are and deal with those" (c7). Many participants also shared a sense of loss as they exited the role and moved back into the faculty rank full time. Preparing for loss, role change, and the subsequent return to the faculty rank was advice offered by the participants.

Most of the preceding findings focus upon the individual's responsibility for improving their experience as chair. However, many also emphasized the importance of the institution's responsibility in preparing and supporting leaders. Some participants had the opportunity to shadow their predecessor and assume responsibilities gradually, but many were thrown into the role with little preparation. They pressed for "a proper, effective, in-house training system that begins long before someone actually takes over the role of chair" (c5). They wished for more consistent, concrete training and institutional support throughout chairship.

## Discussion

The findings of this study extend our understanding of academic chairs by illuminating the experiences of those living the role. The qualitative analysis of these interviews revealed three main themes. Participants introduced the topic of rewards during their interviews, alongside detailed conversations about daily challenges and advice for incoming chairs. These results provide a range of possible responses to long-standing calls for improvements to academic chair support (Gmelch & Burns, 1993; Sarros et al., 1999; Wolverton et al., 2005).

The rewards and personal transformation data that our participants shared mirrored the experience described in Armstrong and Woloshyn's (2017) study, affirming that personal growth and pride in professional contributions are important benefits of the chair role. From our data, four categories of rewards emerged: (a) opportunities to shape degrees and department vision, (b) ability to build community, (c) chance to connect with the larger university, and (d) experience of personal growth and transformation. These rewards might explain why many chairs continue to endorse the role. Gmelch et al. (2017) found that 90% of department chairs answered affirmatively when asked if they had to do it over again, a result that was mirrored in our findings. The curious juxtaposition of struggling with the role yet valuing it enough to persist conveys the importance of harnessing and celebrating the benefits of chairship to sustain chair positivity and department morale.

Challenges expressed by our participants require careful consideration in light of the research from Aziz et al. (2005), who concluded that while training in personnel management should be a priority, these complex skills are difficult to acquire. Our participants said they craved professional development in areas relating to conflict resolution, emotional intelligence skills, and consensus-building techniques. Together these likely would support success with managing the complexity of faculty relations (Parrish, 2011). Results of our study also emphasized the importance of having at least one skilled mentor to help apply personnel management knowledge to the unique complexities found in this role. Brinkley-Etzkorn and Lane (2019) also identified this need for mentors. Our participants noted how much they valued the emotional support and knowledge gained through discussion among chairs, a finding echoed by Weaver et al. (2019) who called for chair support "groups or a committee where department chairs across disciplines meet regularly and discuss issues that they face" (p. 183).

Many participants expressed a yearning for systematic training and opportunities. Wolverton et al. (2005) suggest institutional adoption of professional training programs for prospective chairs. According to our study and the literature reviewed, too often chairs are left floundering with insufficient background or preparation for the administrative tasks of the chair role (Armstrong & Woloshyn, 2017; Aziz et al., 2005). Training should provide as many of the practical skills as possible regarding budget, scheduling, and faculty evaluation.

Our participants sometimes faced top-down pressure that ran counter to their socialization as faculty members. This experience was also apparent for Armstrong and Woloshyn's (2017) participants who "largely resisted managerial expectations and continued to perceive their position as a voluntary, service-centred one, focused on advocacy and representation" (p. 109). Deans and other administrators need to recognize the strain for chairs of bridging faculty and administration (Bossmann et al., 2016; Sherman et al., 2012) and provide strategies for seeking timely faculty input and communicating administrative decisions with faculty.

Participants in this study echo the recommendations from Wolverton et al. (2005) who suggest a restructuring of the chair role. Delegation of some jobs and reallocation of routine tasks to administrative staff could make the amorphous position more sustainable. They believed consistent shadowing for incoming chairs with a more gradual assumption of duties also would have decreased chair stress (Wolverton et al., 2005).

The physical and mental health challenges experienced by chairs while doing their job were deeply concerning. Health impacts disclosed included significant medical events, onset of chronic conditions, and mental health issues including anxiousness, exhaustion, pessimism, and disillusionment. Participants often linked these tolls with being overworked, positioned

between groups of competing interests (faculty team and administrative team), and the demand of high-conflict situations.

Given this toll, it was unsurprising that the importance of placing boundaries on one's work and nurturing life outside of the workplace came through in the analysis. This may include, as some participants described, finding a "third space" (Oldenburg, 2000) beyond work and home (faith communities, hobbies, volunteer work)—a place that provides a sense of belonging, support, and expression of identity. For others, mental health seemed bolstered by adopting a stoic perspective on work, growing a thick skin, or embracing a sense of personal agency. Activities and home life outside of the role were linked frequently with health and resilience.

Due to the adverse effect of the chair responsibilities on scholarship, prospective chairs must think critically about their research and teaching agendas and consider how administrative leadership duties might curb their productivity. Concern about the cost to one's own scholarship was clear in this data, and similar themes have been expressed in much of the literature about postsecondary leaders (Weaver et al., 2019; Wolverton et al., 2005). Gmelch et al. (2017) caution prospective leaders to wait until they have been promoted to full professor before accepting an administrative position. This advice would significantly limit the pool of prospective chairs and would not address the loss of scholarship experience. Instead, we conclude that it is the system that must shift to allow the workload of chairs to include scholarly work, and it is incumbent upon faculty associations and senior administrators to examine ways to ensure that such service does not unduly impact the trajectory of the professor's career.

### Calls to Action

Many of the challenges raised by our study are not new. For nearly 30 years, studies of chairs and department heads have offered similar conclusions. These long-standing concerns, along with a marked lack of progress, demonstrate that we cannot continue to expect individuals to solve these problems. Self-care and a hope that all will be well are not enough. Instead, a more systemic and structural response is needed. We draw upon our data to highlight areas that would lead to meaningful changes in training, mental health, and recognition of the chair role. What can the larger university infrastructure do to help reframe and redefine these jobs? Based on the chairship experiences of our research team members, supported by the literature, and reflective of what our participants told us, we offer three specific calls.

### *Call to Action 1: Hold the University Responsible for Training and Support*

It is not lost on us that much of the advice proffered in the interviews focused more on what the individual chair should do rather than responsibilities of Deans, other administrators, and the collective agreement. This suggests that there is still a heavy weight of responsibility tied to

individual employees rather than to the development of a strong and sustainable surrounding ecosystem. Thus, an important implication for higher education is establishing structural supports for chairs such as defining the role, providing tailored chair training, ensuring opportunities for preparatory leadership programs, and demonstrating commitment to supporting chairs throughout their 5-year term.

### *Call to Action 2: Address Workplace Bullying and Commit to Mental Wellness*

There seem to be few mechanisms in place to prevent or limit the amount of subtle and sometimes blatant workplace bullying that participants shared. Recognition of the crippling effects of incivility on team functioning (Porath et al., 2015) should compel institutions to take a strong stand against such behaviour. The amorphous job description of chairs requires a critical overhaul to eliminate the polarizing expectations of faculty, staff, and administrators. Chairs would benefit from having their role more clearly defined in terms of scope and authority, with clear boundaries set out to protect against seeing the chair as solely responsible for everything in the department. A leadership model that incorporates shared responsibility would also reduce the health toll on individuals.

### *Call to Action 3: Revise the Collective Agreement and Promotion Criteria*

Our findings illustrate that the chair role requires a clear definition with more tailored support, financial compensation, and academic recognition. Faculty associations could better support these members by identifying chairs as a faculty subset with distinct needs. There must be equitable representation and support of chairs explicitly embedded in collective agreements. More could be done to recognize chair responsibilities, including removing expectations that chairs manage behaviours of other faculty members. This third call also includes an examination and commitment to reward chairs through financial incentives, release time, and unequivocal recognition of chair responsibilities in promotion criteria.

### Next Steps

Although the chair role is an integral part of university governance, the experience of the academic chair in Canada has been under-researched. It would be valuable to expand this study to include institutions of different size or focus, across sectors (college and university), and across geographical regions to assess the impact of the larger ecosystem in which chairs work. Extending the investigation and analysis to consider gendered and racialized experiences would also add depth to the understanding of this role (Acker, 2012, Acker, 2014; Miller et al., 2021). Additionally, assessing the role and responsibilities of university leaders during sustained crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic is also necessary. Further, researchers could focus inquiries on the policies and processes needed to more accurately define the chair role, and to support transitions of individuals into and out of the role. Gathering data from front-line administrative

staff, faculty colleagues, and senior management would add to our collective understanding of how to prepare prospective chairs for effective and transformative university leadership.

Six participants had completed (or were completing) two consecutive chair terms (10 years total). While these participants acknowledged the contributions made, they all described role-fatigue and exhaustion. The utility of completing more than one term of academic leadership is not yet explored in the literature. Exploration will help to establish a university setting where mental wellness, role clarity, work-life balance, and structural supports are maintained as an integral part of the postsecondary infrastructure in higher education.

## Concluding Recommendations

Calling for a coordinated institutional response is the primary recommendation of our findings. To move forward, we must alter the university system so that we better prepare and support chairs. By directly addressing challenges, and by shifting the culture that surrounds these positions, chairs would be more likely to flourish in their roles, savour the experience, and garner the rewards of the position. This shift would make it more likely for chairs to complete their term with their health, content expertise, and enthusiasm for the role intact. This outcome will not be accomplished by focusing on what chairs do in the role or by addressing what skills the individual brings to the position. This kind of change requires an institutional shift including financial remuneration, status recognition, collective agreement clarity, and chair support programming that begins before the role officially starts and continues through the full chair term. With this shift, the academic ecosystem will have the required resources to adequately support the individuals working within it.

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