

Postdoc Academic Chat #4

The Governing Structure of a Research University

Wednesday, January 10, 2018

Questions/Discussion Items to Consider

- **What are the typical responsibilities of an academic vice president or provost and what impact do these responsibilities have on individual faculty?**
- **In what ways can/do deans and department chairs impact the careers of junior faculty?**
- **Why is it useful for junior faculty to understand the “pressures from above” on department chairs and deans?**

Readings

#1 Organization of a Typical University

#2 The Role of the Department Chair

#3 How New Faculty Positions are Established*

#1 Organization of a “Typical” University

From time to time it is useful to review the university structure since, believe it or not, there are many faculty and students in higher education who are unaware of what takes place beyond the department level. The brief excerpt below gives a nice summary the typical U.S. university structure for easy reference. It is from Chapter 2: The Scientific Investigator Within the University Structure in, Making the Right Moves: A Practical Guide to Scientific Management for Postdocs and New Faculty, based on the BWF-HHMI Course in Scientific Management for the Beginning Academic Investigator. Burroughs Wellcome Fund. Research Triangle Park, North Carolina, Howard Hughes Medical Institute, Chevy Chase, Maryland. Copyright © 2004 by the Howard Hughes Medical Institute and Burroughs Wellcome Fund All rights reserved. Reprinted with permission.

Regards,

Rick Reis

Although the major goal of the U.S. universities is the advancement and dissemination of knowledge, universities also need funding to support their activities. A university must seek revenue from a variety of sources and more and more, faculty members are encouraged to generate income. You will need to make your research program either self-supporting or demonstrably worth its cost in some other way.

Most U.S. research universities have roughly similar organizational and reporting structures. The titles of the executive officials may vary, but their functions are generally the same. The organization of a university's administrative staff and its methods of operation reflect a strong tradition of faculty dominance.

University-Wide Responsibility

* Board of trustees or board of regents. The university's highest authority, this governing board is composed of academic, business, and community leaders who hold appointed or elected positions with specific terms. The board meets regularly to review all major policy, financial, and management decisions, including decisions about faculty appointments, promotions, and tenure.

* President or chancellor. The university's chief executive officer, this individual has general oversight of the university's academic programs and financial health. He or she is also the university's public spokesperson, dealing with "big-picture" issues such as relationships with the legislature and other funding bodies, alumni relations, and fund-raising.

* Provost or vice president for academic affairs. As the university's chief academic officer, the provost has programmatic and budgetary oversight over all academic activities. The provost reviews the appointment papers of new faculty members and receives reports from the promotion and tenure committee. The deans of the various colleges report to the provost for academic-related matters. In some universities, vice presidents who are involved with academic affairs (e.g., research, student affairs) also report to the provost.

* Vice president for administration and finance. The university's chief financial officer, this individual is in charge of the fiscal affairs of the university and often also oversees diverse functions such as facilities planning and construction, human resources, and campus services (e.g., parking, public safety, maintenance, and mail service).

* Vice president for research. The university's chief research officer, this individual oversees grants and contracts, research funding, research centers, and institutes, issues relating to technology transfer (patenting and licensing), and research-related committees such as Institutional Review Boards (IRBs) for human subjects research and institutional animal care and use committees.

Other vice presidents have responsibility for other areas that may affect the life of a faculty scientist directly or indirectly. These include the following:

- * Vice president for information technology. This individual oversees the university's computer facilities and telephone systems.
- * Vice president for health sciences. This individual is responsible for the university's health-related institutions, including the medical center and the other health professional schools. (See "Organization of a 'Typical' Academic Health Center," page 30.)
- * Vice president for student affairs. This individual oversees dormitories, recreational facilities, and other necessities of student life and is concerned with issues of student well-being.
- * Vice president for development. This individual manages fund-raising, alumni networks, and university relations.

School- or College-Level Responsibility

* Dean. All department chair report to the dean, who is responsible for the administration of a school or college. A university may have several schools or colleges. Each college may also have an associate or assistant dean or both.

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Department chair. Each college is likely to have several departments, and in the sciences, separate scientific programs within each department. The dean typically appoints the department chair, with input from the tenured faculty, for a limited time period. Within that time frame, however, the department chair exercises considerable control over the allocation of resources within the department, including space, use of support staff, and purchases of equipment and supplies. The department chair makes teaching assignments and oversees the evaluation of faculty performance. The departmental promotion and tenure committee makes its recommendations to the department chair, who then presents the recommendation to the university-wide promotion and tenure committee.

#2 The Role of the Department Chair

For individual faculty the department chair is often the most influential person in their professional life and understanding the roles and responsibilities of the chair is critical for beginning professors. The article below is adapted from: Hecht, Higginson, Gmelch and Tucker (1999). *The Department Chair as Academic Leader*. Phoenix, Arizona: American Council on Education Oryx Press.

Today's department chair has one of the most paradoxical roles in the institution. The chair's role is a crucial leadership position, yet it doesn't carry undisputed authority -- a strong coalition of faculty can seriously impede a chair's ability to lead. The Dean and senior administration rely on the chair to shape the department and serve as the primary

agent of change when it comes to policies, procedures and institutional mandates. On the other hand, the faculty view themselves as instigators and authors of departmental change. Administratively, the staff may see themselves as running the department, but the chair is ultimately responsible for curriculum, planning, budget matters and personnel management. In addition students, alumni, donors, granting agencies, central administration, the Regents, legislators and the public, from time to time, provide input or influence on departmental matters.

The department chair serves as the crucial link between the administration and faculty. Communication must flow in both directions through the chair, and the chair must be able to explain and persuade faculty members, the dean and administrators of what is best for both the department and the institution.

The department chair's work covers a wide range of activities, issues and potential problem areas:

- **Department governance and office management** (shared governance, management of staff, administrative tasks)
- **Curriculum and program development** (instruction, research, service, planning, scheduling, department assessment, accreditation and program review, graduate dissertations)
- **Faculty** (recruitment, hiring, promotion, tenure, retention, evaluation, scheduling, discipline and conflict mediation)
- **Students** (recruitment, retention, student organizations, learning outcomes)
- **Communication and fund raising with external audiences** (granting agencies, accrediting agencies, community, legislators, donors, businesses, foundations)
- **Financial management** (budget planning and management)
- **Facilities management** (space allocation, lab space, resources, equipment)

Power

Pulled in many directions and devoid of supreme power, the role of chair requires leadership skill to move the department. Chairs are equipped with some formal authority by the nature of the title of Department Chair. Their approval is required for many day-to-day actions to occur within the department. The chair has positional power regarding recommendation for pay raises, promotion, tenure, teaching assignments and allocation of resources. Positional power regarding faculty extends to writing of letters of recommendation, introductions to professional acquaintances, recommendation for membership or leadership roles in professional associations, and contacts for external consulting jobs.

Personal power and influence is perhaps the chair's best tool. A well-respected chair, who is perceived as open, honest and credible, can ask for and receive faculty cooperation. This personal power must be earned. It is based on a high level of credibility with many constituencies (faculty members, the Dean, administrators) a good reputation in one's discipline and the proven ability to gain resources for the department. Strong interpersonal communication skills are also necessary for personal power and influence. Chairs with low personal power and credibility will encounter resistance to their ideas and are ineffective change agents for the institution.

Direct Leadership Impact

Most chairs, recently plucked from a peer relationship with colleagues, have difficulty with the concept of power. Another way to look at it is to consider the direct leadership impact of a department chair. Chairs have the ability to influence the department's climate and culture, the opportunity to shape the future of the department and the responsibility to guide department dialog in positive and fruitful directions. A chair, using personal power, influence and leadership has the ability to set the tone and re-invigorate an unmotivated, fractious or stagnant department for the benefit of individuals, the department as a whole and the institution. In this respect no other leadership role within the academy has as much direct impact on the quality and future of the institution as a department chair.

3. How New Faculty Positions are Established*

The excerpt below looks at how new faculty positions or billets are determined and what departments look for in new faculty. As a potential faculty member you need to understand this important process that has its origins within departments or even divisions within departments, but which can also reach up to the provost level before specific allocations are made.

Rick Reis

*From Chapter 8, Applying for Positions in the book, Tomorrow's Professor: Preparing for Academic Positions in Science and Engineering, Richard Reis, IEEE Press, 1997.

In the last year of my graduate studies I applied to a number of universities for entry level assistant professorships. The physics department at one school told me in advance that it wasn't absolutely certain a position was available. Two days after my campus visit the person who conveyed this information to me suddenly died. On hearing the news my advisor remarked, somewhat insensitively I thought, "Now you know there's an opening!" Well, not exactly. The position freed up by the demise of my host went to the chemistry department!

How New Positions Are Established

New faculty slots, or billets, are among the most prized resources in all of academia. As I found out, they are by no means entitlements. Billets for tenure-track appointments that can last a lifetime are dispensed with the utmost care. They can determine the direction and character of a department, school and institution, for years to come.

A common, but by no means universal approach, is one in which new billets are determined by the vice president for academic affairs or the provost who then allocates a certain number to various schools, i.e., engineering, science, humanities, and law. In principle, if a faculty member retires from the mechanical engineering department in the school of engineering, that billet could be taken away from the school of engineering and granted to the economics department in the school of humanities. However, such reallocations across schools are quite rare.

More likely is the possibility that a dean will try and use billets to direct the teaching and research mission of the school. He or she may decide that an area such as water resources in the civil engineering department, from which a faculty member just retired, should be de-emphasized in favor of the expansion of an area such as telecommunications in the electrical engineering department. However, my case notwithstanding, such reallocations across departments are also not the norm.

While billets tend to stay in departments, they certainly don't have to stay in particular fields. It is not at all uncommon, for say a biology department, to lose a population biologist and have him or her replaced by a geneticist. In most cases the department decides which area to fill after considerable discussion and then a vote of each faculty member. Yet, in some cases, particularly where there are department heads, as opposed to department chairs, the former can wield considerable decision making power and overrule a faculty recommendation.

Given the range of possibilities outlined above, you need to look for ways to find out how things are done in the departments to which you are applying.

What Departments Look for in New Faculty

Once a department obtains a billet, its primary goal is to find someone who can teach certain classes. This need is what really drives new positions, even at research universities. The process of assigning faculty to classes is one of the most important responsibilities of a department chair and finding someone who is flexible in terms of the type and level of courses they can teach can be quite an advantage.

The degree of flexibility required is often a function of the size of the department. Large departments can afford to have someone who is more specialized than can smaller departments. Kirk Schulz, of the chemical engineering department at Michigan Technical University, puts it this way:

Faculty from large top-notch research institutions often arrive expecting to teach only in their area of expertise. The reality is that in a department of five or six faculty with both an undergraduate and graduate program, they may have to teach a course significantly out of their discipline.

While most advertisements for new positions specify a particular research or subject matter area, others will list two or three possible areas. Still others can be quite general, i.e., organic chemistry, which has many different sub-disciplines. Departments will rarely hire someone because of their specific dissertation topic, but rather because of what such a topic says about their ability to do further scholarship in a particular area.

Finding the right fit is critically important to a department, although "fit" can mean different things to different departments. Most departments are looking for the following:

- overall promise,
- general teaching ability,
- ability to teach courses in need of staffing,
- ability to do research/scholarship in specific areas, a specific research orientation,
- compatibility with department and institution, and
- potential for securing external research funding.

The above list is not necessarily in order of priority. What is most important depends on the nature of the department and the institution.

As an example, consider high-energy physics. Virtually all schools have physics departments, but very few of these departments are involved in high-energy physics research. One reason is that much of this research is actually done at national laboratories away from the main campuses. Not many schools can support extended absences of faculty who need to be off-site to carry out their research. Even with excellent research and teaching credentials, most physics departments, including those at Research I universities, just don't have opportunities for high-energy physicists.

Even schools that do have high-energy physics programs will not be looking for just any kind of high-energy physicist. As noted in Chapter 5, the step from high-energy physics graduate student to high energy postdoc is a big one. As a postdoc you are expected to write proposals, supervise a research project and associated graduate students, review colleagues papers, and in various ways contribute to the research around you. The step from high-energy physics postdoc to high-energy physics faculty member is an even bigger one, and even fewer make it. In addition to evidence of teaching and research capabilities, the department will want to see potential for leadership, an ability to direct a high energy research program, organizational and managerial skills, and a facility for raising funds.

Now consider theoretical physics. Here, the size of the typical research group and the infrastructure demands are much less than for high-energy physics, thus the requirements may also be less stringent. Many departments, including those at masters and baccalaureate schools, will want a theoretical physicist who can teach a variety of courses, won't travel a great deal (as do high energy physicists), and can conduct research with a much lower overhead.

The point of the above examples is that you need to find out what departments really want. While determining departmental needs is not as difficult as you might first imagine (see Section 8.3), it is also true that departments don't always know exactly what they are looking for. As Candice Yano, a professor of operations and industrial engineering who has served on search committees at both the University of Michigan and the University of California, Berkeley, notes, "Sometimes several areas are considered in a search and the faculty fight it out after they interview a number of candidates. In such cases it is particularly important that you know something about the faculty who are going to interview you." It should be possible to obtain the names of most of these faculty from the chairman of the search committee. You can then "check them out," by examining their home pages on the World Wide Web.

In almost all cases you can be sure departments are asking, "Can this person come here, go through the evaluation process and get tenure in six or seven years?" Some departments are looking for a new extreme point in terms of teaching and other forms of scholarship. Others are looking for more of an overlap. In either case, getting along and being flexible is important. All departments want to know that you are the kind of person who will pull your weight across the board. In small departments where resources are limited this is absolutely critical.

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