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Joseph M. Moxley

University of South Florida Department of English, moxley@usf.edu

Gary A. Olson

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Thought Action

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Inside

A dozen years ago, UC Santa Cruz's Oakes College had one of the most successful programs in minority higher education. Yet within a few years, it was in apparent decline, and its founding provost had departed. Today, revived, its short history teaches important lessons.

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The English Chair: Scholar Or Bureaucrat?

By Joseph M. Moxley and Gary A. Olson

In the past, the English department chair was most often a senior scholar who reluctantly accepted the appointment and whose credibility with colleagues and authority within the department derived from his or her stature within the scholarly community.

But the English department chair position, several chairs have suggested recently, has changed significantly over the last few decades. Chairs are more and more appointed to represent administration rather than faculty. A background in budget and personnel management is now more important than a record as a scholar. "Running an English department is like managing a K-Mart," writes John Gerber.¹

Indeed, because of these changes, there is good reason to

believe that English department chairs should now acquire management training—and that, perhaps, they need to work more with departmental committees in evaluating faculty.

Changes in the English department chair position have occurred as enrollment has fluctuated and the academic power structure has shifted. Colleges and universities now appear to be challenged by a perception of academia as a place of business, not just a house of intellect.

Patricia Hayward at Florida State University's Institute for Departmental Leadership recently polled biology and English department chairs at 384 public and private institutions. The majority of English chairs who responded to Hayward's survey agreed that "the number and range of the

Joseph M. Moxley, an associate professor of English at the University of South Florida, is editor of *Creative Writing in America: Theory and Pedagogy* and has published many articles in journals such as *College Composition and Communication*. **Gary A. Olson** is associate professor of English and teaches in the graduate program in rhetoric and composition at USF. He is author or co-author of eight books and edits *The Journal of Advanced Composition*.

The deans felt strongly that managerial skills are more important in the chair of an English department than activities as a scholar or teacher.

chairperson's responsibilities are increasing." And their responses to Hayward's questions suggested that the responsibilities are also becoming more administrative.²

According to John Roberts, writing as chair of English at the University of Missouri at Columbia, the type of person likely to fill the position of English chair has also changed:

"Nowadays, the chairman may not be the most visible scholar on the faculty," says Roberts. "In fact, he is very likely a young professor, still developing and growing in his career, and not infrequently he, or she (certainly a major shift), may still be an associate professor."³

To discover what abilities English department chairs actually need to succeed, we randomly surveyed deans of arts and science colleges from across the nation. We selected a sample of 350 deans at universities with enrollments of more than 10,000 students, among which every state was represented. Of the the 350 deans that we surveyed, 174 returned their questionnaires.

We surveyed deans because we assumed that they would be able to tell us the most about the authority of English chairs and whether most chairs are adequately trained for their posi-

tions. Our questionnaire asked deans to rate various duties and qualities of chairmanship on a four-point scale from "essential" to "not important." We also asked the deans to rank the five of these qualities that they thought most important. Finally, at the end of the questionnaire, we asked two open-ended questions: "What important qualities are not listed in this questionnaire?" and "Please comment on the aspect of chairmanship that you consider most important" (see appendix).

We discovered that the five duties that the deans feel strongest about are indeed related to management, and, in fact, that managerial skills are more important than the chair's activities as scholar or teacher.

In order of importance, the five most essential duties, as perceived by the deans, are managing the departmental budget, possessing strong communication skills, encouraging faculty development, communicating regularly with the dean, applauding/rewarding faculty achievement.

The overwhelming majority of deans (68 percent) consider the ability to manage the budget the English chair's most essential skill. Only three respondents

The deans contend that the chairs must play an active role in increasing the scholarly productivity and the professional enrichment of faculty.

claimed that budgeting is "not important." Many deans reiterate in their prose remarks that the "ability to work with the department's budget is to me the most important." Clearly, like any capable manager in the corporate world, the chair must be above all a proficient money manager.

The deans find second most important the chair's ability to communicate effectively. Communication skills in general are fundamental to successful management, and the deans' commentaries suggest that they are also essential to effectiveness as an English department chair. One dean writes: "Management and communication skills are essential. The job requires a clear and organized thinker and a person who can communicate effectively with all areas of the college."

The duties third and fifth most important to the deans are aspects of personnel management: encouraging faculty development and rewarding faculty achievement. That these two faculty development issues are among the top five indicates that faculty-chair relations are central to a smoothly running department. They also suggest that, as an effective manager, the chair shapes the department through skillful management of personnel—coaching, guiding, and directing.

The deans contend that the chairs must play an active role in increasing the scholarly productivity and the professional enrichment of faculty. One dean writes that the chair "must be able to recognize quality scholarship and help others do the same." Another suggests that "the chair is the key person in faculty development: the mentor for young faculty and the lead person for professional renewal for the senior faculty."

Apparently, English department chairs themselves agree that there is a need to encourage research. Of the chairs polled by Florida State University's Institute for Departmental Leadership study, 72 percent claim that their faculty are more interested in teaching than research. And 92 percent say that their faculty actually spend more time on teaching than on research.

Given the emphasis on managerial skills, it's not surprising that the respondents to *our* survey believe that "communicating regularly with the dean" (fourth in the ranking) is so important. Any specialist in organizational management will stress that such "lateral communication" is essential to the smooth operation of every complex organization.

Two thirds of English chairs themselves believe they should receive some form of training in budget preparation and communication skills.

One dean writes that the chair "must always keep the dean apprised of department pressure points." Another finds essential "the chair's ability to articulate, clearly and forcefully, the departmental perspective to the dean."

Despite the importance ascribed to budget management and other managerial abilities, it is safe to assume that most faculty members trained principally in the humanities are, at least at first, not proficient in these skills. In fact, 60 percent of the chairs responding to the IDL study state that they received no formal training of any kind before assuming chairmanship.

Not surprisingly, 68 percent of the respondents believe that chairs should receive some form of training in budget preparation and communication skills. Thus, the IDL study of chairs, as well as our own survey of deans, suggests that English chairs could benefit from training in budgeting, interpersonal communications, and problem solving.

In contrast to this emphasis on managerial process, the deans place activities related to scholarship and teaching quite low on their scale. Only 21 percent of the respondents feel that it is essential that the chair "maintain his or

her own scholarship." Not surprisingly, the IDL survey reveals that chairs spend an average of only 12 percent of their work time on scholarly research and personal professional development.

Similarly, the deans feel that it is not important that chairs "receive outstanding teaching evaluations." Only 7 percent of the deans say that this is "essential." Clearly, excellence in scholarship and teaching is no longer the *sine qua non* of chairmanship. And while a few deans comment that the chair should be "an intellectual trailblazer" at the "cutting edge of the discipline," this survey reveals that the deans overwhelmingly have chosen *managerial* skills over scholarly acumen as the most important factor in effective chairmanship.

Our study also asked the deans whether they believe that the English chair should represent primarily their faculty or the administration. We purposely did not include a third choice (i.e., "both") because we wanted to see how the deans would respond when forced to choose. The results demonstrate that the debate still rages. Of the 174 respondents, 55 percent marked "faculty," 12 percent marked "administration," and 33 percent supplied

Should the chair represent faculty or administration? Quoting Louis XIV, one dean wrote, 'The administration, of course. L'etat, c'est moi!'

their own third choice: "both."

So heated is this issue that more deans address it in their prose remarks than any other issue. In defending the chair's representation of the administration, one dean writes, "The chair should represent management; our chair is appointed, not elected." Quoting Louis XIV's legendary proclamation, another dean writes, "The administration, of course. *L'etat, c'est moi!*"—the state, it is I.

In contrast, one dean says that the chair must "be a spokesman for the department to the dean and other administrators and must be able to explain the needs of the department." A second contends that the chair's "role is collegial, not administrative. He is a spokesperson for equals."

But the most vocal respondents see the chair as a dual representative. The effective chair, one says, needs the ability "to keep the dean and the faculty happy at the same time—which is near impossible." Another writes that the chair must "perform an ambivalent role somewhere between advocacy for faculty and implementation of administrative policies." A third quips, "This is akin to the Miller Lite 'less filling-great taste' dispute. The chair should represent *English*."

Who it is that the English department chair should represent is clearly controversial and far from being resolved. Some deans perceive the chair as primarily part of management. And it is hard to deny that this perception is at least partly correct, since most chairs have the power of hiring, firing, and promoting faculty. In fact, only 17 percent of the chairs who responded to the IDL study were elected by department faculty.

Compounding the issue, collective bargaining agreements can also play a role in whom the chair represents. But the influence of collective bargaining may be less than most people believe. According to the IDL study, only 20 percent of the chairs' universities are unionized, and 33 percent of these chairs remain outside the bargaining unit. Thus, from the deans' perspective, chairs are valued most for their administrative abilities, but their actual relationship to upper administration is still a matter of dispute.

The deans are also concerned with other management-oriented skills listed in our survey. A majority (83 percent) believe that it is "essential" or "very important" that the English department chair be capable of "making inde-

The deans seem unconcerned about the tensions between literature and composition faculty. Only one writes that the chair must attempt to 'bridge the gap.'

pendent decisions." That is, the chair must be able to "lead an effective decision-making process, both in planning and implementing policy" and "make unpopular decisions and carry out unpopular policies without transferring responsibility to another person or group."

Most deans feel strongly about this issue, but several caution that the chair must function as a leader, not as an autocrat. "The chair must be able to balance independent decision making with faculty involvement in the creation of policy," writes one dean. Says another, "An effective English department chair must know how to balance the demands of involving faculty in decision making and of asserting strong individual leadership."

Clearly, beyond abilities as a money manager, effective communicator, and source of motivation, the English chair must be an independent thinker, capable of advancing policies and decisions.

The chair's role as politician, which chairs so often discuss in the professional literature, also concerns the deans. A great majority of deans (84 percent) believe that it is "essential" or "very important" that the chair "attempt to unify faculty." And

an almost equal percentage believe the chair must be able to "handle political problems."

Though several deans write that the chair must remain apolitical, more contend that the chair must exhibit "political savvy." The dean of a large southern university philosophizes, "Serving as a chair is a hard job because most of us are not well prepared to handle political conflicts."

Despite this emphasis on political savvy—and given the depth to which many English departments are now divided—the respondents seem surprisingly unconcerned about the tensions between literature and composition faculty, tensions reported extensively in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* recently. Only one dean writes that the chair "must attempt to bridge the gap" between the two.

Clearly, the role of the English department chair has changed radically. The old-fashioned "honorific" chairmanship is no longer tenable. As John Roberts puts it, "More and more departments are beginning to recognize that specific skills and abilities required of an effective chairman are not necessarily the same as those needed for the publishing scholar."⁴

Judging from our study, Roberts is right.

We have been concerned with the role of the English department chair, but our results may reflect a change in the intellectual atmosphere within academia that holds true for other departments as well.

That is born out by Patricia Hayward's comparison of the responsibilities and activities of English department chairs with those of biology chairs. Hayward found that—in determining decision making, priorities, budget-related tasks, and working conditions—the department chair's academic discipline is "frequently of secondary importance" to the size of the institution, the level of degree offered, or whether or not it was public or private.

Today's chairs face shrinking budgets and poor faculty morale. Understandably, their primary concern is often the bottom line, not scholarly publication or even

intellectual pursuits. Given the demands of chairs' administrative responsibilities—and given that they are not significantly engaged in teaching and research—we should probably question whether chairs are in the best position to evaluate faculty without input from other faculty.

Regardless of the modern chairs' academic disciplines, they must possess a broad array of sophisticated managerial skills, attributes that seem more natural to a business manager than a scholar and for which they may need conscious preparation.

As Joseph Millichap, chair of the English department at Western Kentucky University, writes: "Let me boldly assert that ... in the broad, philosophical sense we are all 'managers,' and we can learn some important things from the consideration of both management practice and theory."⁶ ■

Notes

¹ John Gerber, "The Roles of the Chairman," *ADE Bulletin* 60 (February 1979): 1.

² Patricia C. Hayward, *Summary of Results: English Department Chairperson Questionnaire* (Tallahassee, Florida: Institute for Departmental Leadership, Florida State University, July 1985): 3. Hayward received a 76 percent response rate (586 questionnaires were returned in her survey of 384 English and 384 biology chairs). Her survey included graduate and undergraduate institutions, but not community colleges.

³ John Roberts, "Reflections on the Chairmanship," *ADE Bulletin* 59 (Nov. 1978): 31.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 31.

⁵ Patricia C. Hayward, "A Discriminant Analytic Test of Biglan's Theoretical Distinction Between Biology and English Department Chairpersons," *Research in Higher Education* 25:2 (1986): 146.

⁶ Joseph Millichap, "Contemporary Management Theory and the English Department," *ADE Bulletin* 85 (Winter 1986): 50.

Appendix A.**Leadership Questionnaire**

DIRECTIONS: The first 21 statements relate to activities of the department chair. Please rate each one on the 1-4 scale by checking the appropriate box. [Editor's note: The boxes included "essential," "very important," "important," and "not important."] The remaining questions ask for brief answers.

- 1) delegates authority
- 2) manages department budget
- 3) schedules regular faculty meetings
- 4) maintains his or her own scholarship
- 5) makes independent decisions
- 6) possesses strong communication skills
- 7) applauds/rewards faculty achievement
- 8) attempts to unify faculty
- 9) implements dean's policies
- 10) expresses departmental policy in written documents
- 11) establishes liaisons with community
- 12) encourages faculty development
- 13) receives outstanding teaching evaluations
- 14) develops new programs
- 15) maintains social relationships with faculty
- 16) criticizes poor work
- 17) handles political problems
- 18) maintains an open information policy
- 19) communicates regularly with the dean
- 20) familiarizes the dean with critical research and issues in the chair's field
- 21) Remains available throughout the work day
- 22) Should the chair primarily represent the A) faculty or B) the administration?
- 23) Of the 21 leadership qualities mentioned above, please rank the 5 most important (use the numbers, e.g., 1-21)
- 24) What important qualities are not listed in this questionnaire?
- 25) Please comment on the aspects of chairmanship that you consider most important: