The Call for Department Chair Leadership: Why Chairs Serve, What They Do, How They Develop, How Long They Serve, and Is There Life After Chairing?
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The Call for Department Chair Leadership:
Why Chairs Serve, What They Do, How They Develop, How Long They Serve, and Is There Life After Chairing?

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Abstract
The department chair position is the most critical role in the university, and the most unique management position in America. The time of “amateur administration” is over — where professors play musical chairs, stepping occasionally into the role of department chair. Too much is at stake in this era of change and challenge to let leadership be left to chance or taking turns. This paper reviews the research and provides insights to future research around several basic questions: (1) Why do faculty choose to serve as department chairs? (2) How do they develop their leadership capabilities? (3) What are the roles and responsibilities of department chairs? (4) How long should department chairs serve? And (5) Is there life after chairing?

Keywords
academic leadership, professional development, roles and responsibilities, career, motivation

The time of “amateur administration” is over — where professors play musical chairs, stepping occasionally into the role of department chair. Too much is at stake in this era of change and challenge to let leadership be left to chance or taking turns. The department chair position is the most critical role in the university, and the most unique management position in America. Consider the facts: 80% of university decisions are made at the department level (Carroll & Wolverton, 2004); of the 60,000 chairs in America, one in five turns over every year; and while it takes 10,000 hours of practice to reach competence (projected as eight years for chairs and already established as seven years for faculty to get tenure) (Thomas & Schuh, 2004), only 3% of universities and colleges provide leadership development for department chairs (Cipriano & Riccardi, 2013; Gmelch, Ward, Roberts, & Hirsch, 2017; Gmelch et al., 2002). This paper reviews the research and provides insights to future research around several basic questions: (1) Why do faculty choose to serve as department chairs? (2) How do they develop their leadership capabilities? (3) What are the roles and responsibilities of department chairs? (4) How long should department chairs serve? And (5) Is there life after chairing?

The Call for Leadership
Since academics first receive their training in research and teaching, they scarcely anticipate serving as a department chair. Professors become chairs with only minimal preparation and management training and we continue to reward our new Ph.Ds. for becoming internationally renowned experts in narrow fields, not generalists who could serve in a leadership capacity. Being a chair isn’t on many faculty’s initial professional career plan, or even on their radar screen. From research, anecdotal writings, and 40 years serving in administrative roles at public and private universities, consider the Truths of Department Leadership.

1. Department chairs hold the most important position in the university. Who advances the discipline? Who teaches students? Who produces graduates? Who serves the professional community? Clearly the answer is the department, guided by the department chair. In many ways, the university structure should be turned upside down. Deans need to serve their department chairs as they serve faculty and students.

2. Deans are only as good as their department chairs. An astute provost once uttered this statement and, as a dean for almost two decades, I can attest that my colleges were only as good as the chairs who led productive departments.

3. Eighty percent of university decisions are made at the department level. Department chairs are at the helm to advance their departments and the college. They make the decisions day in and day out -- making a difference in the lives of students and the advancement of their disciplines.
4. **The department chair position is the most unique management position in America.** Do department chairs still teach, advise students, and engage in scholarship? Yes, of course, as virtually all department chairs still teach. Ninety-seven percent of the chairs perceive themselves as faculty, or faculty-administrators, and only 3 percent as administrators (Gmelch et al., 2017). Where in the corporate world do managers take their previous jobs to their new ones?

5. **Only 3% universities and colleges provide professional development for department chairs.** In 1991 only 3% reported they had any systematic leadership development (Gmelch, Burns, Carroll, Harris, Seedorf, & Wentz, 1991), and not much has changed in the couple of decades as studies in 2013 and in 2016 found scarcely more than 3.3% department chairs came to their positions with preparation in the skills they needed to be effective leaders (Cipriano & Riccardi, 2013; Gmelch et al., 2017). “To put it bluntly, academic leadership is one of the few professions one can enter today with absolutely no training in, credentials for, or knowledge about the central duties of the position” (Gmelch & Buller, 2015, p. 2).

6. **The time of amateur administration is over.** This is not a time for professors to play musical chairs, stepping occasionally into the role of department chair. Too much is at stake in this time of change and challenge to let your department’s leadership be left to chance or taking turns. The future of universities and colleges depends on answering the call to department leadership with commitment and vision.

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**Obstacles to the Call for Academic Leadership**

Why do some professors choose to lead and others not? What conditions do we create in universities that act as barriers to attracting faculty to serve as department chairs?

**Snuff Out the Spark Before the Leadership Flame is Ignited.** First, we have ourselves to blame. If a spark of enthusiasm for leadership is ignited in any young faculty, the institutional system may well snuff it out (Gardner, 1987). Far from encouraging faculty, we hold the needs for experts and professionals higher than that of leaders and fail to cultivate leadership talent in junior faculty.

**Exalt the Prestige and Prowess of the Professional Expert.** Some academics may possess the requisite skills and leadership ability but chose not to respond to the call for leadership. From graduate school days, academics are socialized to drive down the road to specialization. But academic leaders must be generalists to cope with the diversity of problems and multitude of constituencies. They must look at their departments with a broader vision and more systemic point of view.

**Ignore the Rigors of Public and Personal Life.** Academics typically join the academy in search of a professional life characterized by autonomy and independence. During their tenure as professors they observe the stormy years of chairs and scathing criticisms of academic administrators in general – chairs, deans, provosts and presidents – and wonder, “Why would I want to subject myself to such scrutiny and public criticism?” Even at home, academics find that leadership is not a “family-friendly” profession. Thus, most academics are not willing to give up their professional and personal lives for one of servant leadership.

**Precarious state of executive selection.** Experts contend that the state of selection of the top three levels of the organization is precarious at best (Sessa & Taylor, 2000). Why? First, universities and colleges have very little expertise in the selection of leaders, and at times leave that process to happenstance or executive search firms. Second, executives themselves do not feel particularly competent in the skills needed in selection, and gravitate instead to pressing, day-to-day needs. Finally, most institutions of higher education have inadequate hiring, training, promotional, and succession-planning systems. Symbolically, new administrators are “given the gavel” one day as their predecessor leaves the next. Instead, universities should practice “passing the baton” -- mentoring the new administrator months before taking office and coaching him/her into their new responsibilities and roles.

To recount these obstacles is not an attempt to deafen the call to leadership, rather to call attention to the obstacles that must be overcome in order to develop the next generation of department chairs. What strategies can be used to hurdle the obstacles of the reluctant leader – to ignite the flame of servant leadership; to exalt the need for generalists as leaders; and to address the strains on public and personal life. Given these conditions, how do we send a call out to awaken the latent leaders in the academy? How do we make some academics aware of their leadership potential?

Now, let’s sharpen the focus of this paper why faculty serve as department chairs and how do they develop?
**Why Be a Department Chair?**

Given the barriers, complications, and ambiguities of the chair position, why do faculty choose to serve? What are the real motives faculty have for accepting the position, and does their motivation affect their willingness to be a leader? The most important reason for accepting the challenge to serve remained the same today (Gmelch & Ward, 2016), as in 1991 (Gmelch et al., 1991): to advance either themselves or their departments (Table 1). They basically accepted the position for intrinsic reasons. Secondarily, faculty felt a need or pressure to serve since they were drafted by the dean or out of necessity, no one else to do it. Does the initial motivation affect the chair’s willingness to serve a second term? In 1991, only 25% of those motivated by extrinsic reasons (drafted by the dean or no other choice but to accept the position) were willing to serve a second term. In contrast, 75% of the chairs motivated by advancing themselves or their departments were willing to serve again. Given the current leadership crisis in higher education, it is critical for department chairs to answer the leadership call to advance themselves and the institution.

Table 1
The Top Seven Reasons Faculty Become Department Chairs

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>2016</th>
<th>1991</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Advance department</td>
<td>Personal development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Personal development</td>
<td>Drafted by Dean</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Out of necessity</td>
<td>Out of necessity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Drafted by Dean</td>
<td>To be in control of environment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Sense of duty</td>
<td>Sense of duty</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Advance career</td>
<td>Financial gain</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Financial gain</td>
<td>Opportunity to relocate</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Professional Identity.** When asked about their identity (do chairs view themselves as faculty, administrator, or both?) it is clear that over time, chairs have grown to view themselves as academics and administrators. As Table 2 demonstrates, an even greater number self-identified their role as both faculty and administration (53% in 1991 compared to 70% in 2016) and few still identified themselves as strictly “an administrator” (4% and 3%, respectively).

Table 2
Do Chairs View Themselves as Faculty, Administrators, or Both?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>2016</th>
<th>1991</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Faculty</td>
<td>27%</td>
<td>43%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Administrator</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Both</td>
<td>70%</td>
<td>53%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**How to “Build” Department Chairs**

Academic leaders typically come to their positions without leadership training; without prior executive experience; without a clear understanding of the ambiguity and complexity of their roles; without recognition of the metamorphic changes that occur as one transforms from an academic to an academic leader; and without an awareness of the cost to their academic and personal lives (Gmelch, 2000). The transformation to academic leadership takes time and dedication, and not all faculty make the complete transition to leadership. This part of the paper addresses the question of personal challenges academic leaders face and how to successfully make the transition to leadership.

**The Call Without Leadership Training.** To become an expert takes time. The development of leadership ability is a long and complex process. The influence of family, peers, education, sports and social activities in high school and college (Wolverton & Gmelch, 2002) impact an individual's ability to lead and their need for achievement, self-esteem, power, and service. “If experience is such an important teacher, and the motivation to lead is rooted in one’s past, and leadership skills are indeed so complex and related to one’s work and past, what role can training hope to play?” (Conger, 1992, p. 34).

How long does it take to become an expert? Studies of experts in the corporate world who attain international levels of performance point to the 10 year rule of preparation (Ericsson, Krampe, & Tesch-Romer, 1993). Gladwell (2008), in his popular book *Outliers*, testifies it takes 10,000 hours of practice to become an expert. In the American university, 7 years represents the threshold for faculty to attain the status of expert in order to achieve tenure and promotion at the associate professor level, and another 7 years for full membership in the academy. Whether you accept the 10,000 hour rule, the 10 year rule or the 7 to 14 year rule -- why do we assume we can “build” a department chair with a one day seminar? Does
the Ph.D. represent a terminal degree, almost like terminal illness? Sadly, of the universities we have studied, few have leadership development programs (Gmelch & Buller, 2015).

The Call Without Administrative Experience. As emphatically stated previously, time of amateur administration is over. Department chairs often see themselves as scholars who, out of a sense of duty, temporarily accept responsibility for administrative tasks so other professors can continue with their teaching and scholarly pursuits. Nearly 60,000 scholars in the United State currently serve as department chairs and almost one quarter will need to be replaced each year. We have already established that opportunities for individual skill development through training is woefully inadequate, but what are we doing to provide leadership experiences to prepare our next generation of academic leaders? Even if we had systematic skill development opportunities available, if you asked managers where they learned their leadership abilities, most will tell you from their job experiences. In fact, a poll of 1,450 managers from twelve corporations cited experience, not the classroom, as the best teacher for leadership (Ready, 1994). One should not draw the conclusion that formal training and education are of limited value, as academic leadership training combined with experience and socialization, can heighten faculty members’ appreciation for leadership and strengthen their motivation to develop leadership capabilities.

The Call Without Understanding Role Conflict and Ambiguity. Caught between conflicting interests of faculty and administration, trying to look in two directions – department chairs often don’t know which way to turn. They mediate the concerns of the university mission to faculty and, at the same time, they try to champion the values of their faculty. As a result they find themselves swiveling between their faculty colleagues and university administration. In essence, they are caught in the god-like role of “Janus,” a Roman god with two faces looking in two directions at the same time. While department chairs don’t have to worry about being deified, they find themselves in a unique position -- a leadership role that has no parallel in business or industry (Gmelch & Miskin, 2004). To balance their roles they must learn to swivel without appearing dizzy, schizophrenic or “two-faced.” They must employ a facilitative leadership style while working with faculty in the academic core and a more traditional line-authoritative style with the administrative core.

The Call Without Recognition of Metamorphic Changes. The drastic difference between the roles of scholar and administrator helps explain the difficulty in making the transition to department chair. As this transformation – aptly termed the “metamorphosis of the department chair” – takes place, several “faculty” functions and work habits change into “chair” work-styles. These new chair work-styles are much different from what you were used to as a faculty member and will take some adjustment. The following shifts outline nine transitions chairs face when moving from a faculty position to department chair (Gmelch & Seedorf, 1989; Gmelch & Parkay, 1999).

- From solidarity to social. Faculty typically work alone on research, teaching preparation and projects, while chairs must learn to work well with others.
- Focused to fragmented. Faculty have long, uninterrupted periods for scholarly pursuits, while the chair’s day is characterized by brevity, variety, and fragmentation.
- Autonomy to accountability. Faculty enjoy autonomy, while chairs become accountable to faculty, the dean, and central administration.
- Manuscripts to memoranda. Faculty carefully critique and review their manuscripts, while chairs must learn the art of quickly writing succinct, clear memos (and they are refereed!).
- Private to public. Faculty may block out long periods of time for scholarly work, while chairs have an obligation to be accessible throughout the day to the many constituents they serve.
- Professing to persuading. Acting in the role of expert, faculty disseminate information, while chairs profess less and build consensus more.
- Stability to mobility. Faculty inquire and grow professionally within the stability of their discipline and circle of professional acquaintances, while chairs must be more mobile, visible, and political.
- Client to custodian. Faculty act as clients, requesting and expecting university resources, while the chair is a custodian and dispenser of resources.
- Austerity to prosperity. While the difference in salary between faculty and administrator may be insignificant, the new experience of having control over department resources leads the department chair to develop an illusion of considerable “prosperity.”

This portrayal of faculty points to their socialization as scholars for an average period of 16 years before they serve as chair (Carroll, 1991). They see themselves as solitary, focused, autonomous, private, professing, stable -- then suddenly they are selected, elected, or forced into transformation as an academic administrator characterized by its sociality, accountability, fragmentation, and mobility.
This metamorphosis from professor to department chair takes time and dedication and not all make the complete transformation into leadership.

The Call Without an Awareness of the Cost to Scholarship. Department chairs try to retain their identity as scholars while serving in administration. Not surprising, most chairs feel most comfortable and competent in their scholarly role. In fact, 65% of department chairs return to faculty status after serving in their administrative capacity, and therefore are wise to protect their scholarly interests. They express frustration at their inability to spend much time pursuing academic agendas. “Having insufficient time to remain current in my discipline” causes the high stress for department chairs (Gmelch & Burns, 1994; Gmelch et al., 2018). Most department chairs would spend more time on their own academic endeavors if they could but find it virtually impossible because of the demands of leadership duties. If universities and colleges want to build a sustained leadership capacity within they must address the issue of balance in the academic leader’s life.

Building Spheres of Leadership Development

Our latest research has been focusing on leadership development strategies for Building Academic Leadership Capacity: A Guide to Best Practices (Gmelch & Buller, 2015). However, the audience for this book is not faculty but university policy makers (deans, provosts, and presidents) responsible for recruiting and developing department chairs. If a faculty member aspires to be department chair, three spheres serve as an analytical framework for the development of effective chairs (Figure 1).

Figure 1
Department Chair Leadership Development

![Figure 1 - Department Chair Leadership Development](image)

**Conceptual Understanding.** Where do chairs work? What type of institution? What are the roles of a department chair? How is being chair in the sciences department different than an English department? The roles, responsibilities, tasks, and dimensions of department chair may be different given the context and organizational conditions of your college or university. Department chairs need to define academic leadership for themselves and find the right place and job fit. What does it mean to build a community of scholars, empower others, and set direction for your department? Conceptual understanding involved the knowledge that department chairs need in order to do their jobs effectively. It includes understanding the organizational culture and mastering the dynamics that distinguish one department from another. While conceptual understanding of leadership roles is a necessary condition to lead, it is not sufficient without application of appropriate behaviors and skills.

**Skill Development.** To perform the roles and responsibilities, chairs need to hone their skills. What skills are most important to be an effective chair? Some skills, such as communication, performance coaching, conflict resolution, negotiations, and resource deployment, are more readily teachable than complex competencies such as strategic vision, which requires a long gestation period and involves a multiplicity of skills (Conger, 1992; Westley, 1992). Department chairs identified the following dozen skills needed to be an effective leader (Gmelch & Buller, 2015, p. 16):

1. Managing time properly, particularly in the ability to maintain currency in research while performing administrative duties
2. Providing genuine leadership, not mere management, within the distinctive organizational structure of higher education
3. Instituting effective faculty development programs
4. Strategic thinking and creating a compelling vision for the future
5. Coaching and counseling faculty members so as to improve their performance
6. Making sound decisions
7. Communicating effectively with stakeholders
8. Managing conflict
9. Working harmoniously with upper administrative levels
10. Promoting teamwork
11. Building community
12. Leading change

The importance of these topics was validated by those found in most leadership development programs (Conger & Benjamin, 1999).
Reflective Practice. Understanding the department chair roles and possessing the requisite skills cannot be achieved without the ability to reflect, correct, and take action. Leadership development is an “inner” journey of self-knowledge, personal awareness, and corrective feedback. Moral, ethical, and spiritual dimensions are necessary to complete the leadership journey. To develop as a chair is very much about finding one’s voice (Kouses & Posner, 1987). What trait or quality do faculty want most in their department chair? Honesty! Because credibility and authenticity lie at the heart of the chair’s relationship with faculty, identifying guiding beliefs and assumptions lie at the heart of becoming a good department leader (Gmelch & Sarros, 1996). What is the kind of knowing in which competent practitioners engage? How is professional knowing like and unlike the kinds of knowledge faculty present in academic textbooks, scientific papers, and learned journals? Leaders exhibit a kind of knowing-in-practice, most of which is tacit.

Reflection-in-action is central to the art by which leaders deal well with situations of uncertainty, instability, uniqueness, and value conflict (Schon, 1983). Schon contends managers do reflect-in-action, but they seldom reflect on their reflection-in-action. Chairs isolation works against reflection-in-action. Hence, it is crucially important for department chairs to be networked and have confidants. They need to communicate their private dilemmas and insights, and test them against the views of their peers. Leadership development does not take place in a vacuum. It flourishes best within a group or with trusted colleagues acting as mentors, partners, coaches, and role models. Department chairs need to create and use communication around three types of networks (Ibarra & Hunter, 2011):

1. **Operational network** to help get work done efficiently and accomplish the duties of the chairs;
2. **Professional/personal network** to develop skills and personal advancement through coaching, mentoring, networking, learning at conferences; and
3. **Strategic network** to help develop a vision for future priorities and challenges – the boundary spanning dimension of chairing.

In summary, to develop as a department chair, faculty should incorporate all three spheres of advancement: conceptual development, skill building, and reflective practice. Each dimension integrates and builds upon the other, and a synergistic relationship characterizes all of them. Conceptual understanding builds your “habits of mind,” skill development your “habits of practice” and reflective practice your “habits of heart.” “The development of campus department leaders rests with each person’s own motivation and talents and with the receptiveness and capacity of universities to support and coach such skills (Gmelch & Buller, 2015).

### What Do Department Chairs Do?

Virtually every managerial book ever written lists and exults the tasks, duties, roles, and responsibilities of administrators. Lists specific to department chair duties range from the exhaustive listing of 97 activities identified by a University of Nebraska research team (Creswell et al., 1990), to the astonishing 54 varieties of tasks and duties cited by Allan Tucker, to the 40 functions forwarded in a study of Australian department chairs (Moses & Roe, 1990). The genesis of these lists can be traced back to Siever’s 12 functions, expanded to 18 by McCarthy, reduced to 15 by Hoyt, and expanded again to 27 by Smart and Elton (Gmelch & Miskin, 2004).

While these studies were robust, they gave chairs little guidance on what was important for chairs to do. This prompted the founding of The UCEA Center for the Study of the Department Chair in 1988 (aka Center for the Study of Academic Leadership) and the subsequent research studies over the past thirty years of 2,600 university department chairs in the United States, 1,580 Australian department heads, 1,000 community college chairs, and an international study of 2,000 academic deans in America and Australia. With regard to the studies of United States department chairs, the following were identified as the ten most important duties (Gmelch et al., 1991; Gmelch & Ward, 2016):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Top 10 Department Chair Responsibilities</th>
<th>2016</th>
<th>1991</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Represent Department to Administration</td>
<td>93%</td>
<td>92%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Maintain Conducive Work Climate</td>
<td>91%</td>
<td>88%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Develop Long-Range Goals</td>
<td>84%</td>
<td>83%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Recruit and Select Faculty</td>
<td>82%</td>
<td>93%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Enhance Quality of Teaching</td>
<td>80%</td>
<td>NA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Manage Department Resources</td>
<td>80%</td>
<td>85%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Solicit Ideas to Improve Department</td>
<td>78%</td>
<td>71%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Evaluate Faculty Performance</td>
<td>75%</td>
<td>90%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Inform Faculty of Institutional Concerns</td>
<td>73%</td>
<td>57%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Teach and Advise Students</td>
<td>72%</td>
<td>60%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The Four Roles of Chairs. Rather than “listing” chair duties, consider four comprehensive roles of department chairs that emerged from factor analyzing the responsibilities: the Faculty Developer, the Manager, the Leader, and the Scholar (Gmelch & Miskin, 2004).

The role of Faculty Developer is viewed by department chairs as their most important responsibility. It involves recruiting, selecting, and evaluating faculty, as well as providing the sort of informal leadership that enhances the faculty’s morale and professional development.

Acting as Manager, the second role, is a requirement of the position, but often least liked by chairs. Chairs spend over half the week in departmental activities. Specifically, they perform the upkeep-functions of preparing budgets, maintaining department records, assigning duties to faculty, supervising non-academic staff, and maintaining finances, facilities, and equipment.

Leader best describes the third role of department chairs. As leaders of their departments, they provide long-term direction and vision, solicit ideas for department improvement, plan and evaluate curriculum development, and plan and conduct departmental meetings. They also provide external leadership for their departments by working with their constituents to coordinate department activities, representing their departments at professional meetings and, on behalf of their departments, participating in college and university committees to keep faculty informed of external concerns. Chairs value this role because it offers opportunities to help others develop professional skills, to stay challenged, and to influence the profession and department. Those chairs who enjoy such leadership activities spend more time performing them.

Finally, since 97% of chairs identify themselves as also faculty, they attempt to retain their scholar identity while serving as chairs. This includes teaching and staying current in their academic disciplines and, for those at research universities, maintaining an active research program and obtaining grants to support it. Chairs enjoy and feel most comfortable in this role, but express frustration with their inability to spend much time on their academic interests. Many would emphasize scholarship if they could, but find it virtually impossible (88% express frustration at their inability to spend much time pursuing their academic interests). Additionally, 86% of department chairs significantly reduced their scholarly activities while serving as chair; for some, scholarship more or less ceases (Gmelch & Miskin, 2004).

How Long Is Long Enough? The Chair Loop

What is the right life-span of a department chair? How long is long enough? Chairs normally serve six years, after which they typically follow one of two paths. Approximately one-in-five chairs move upward in academic administration and complete the full transition from faculty to administration. However, most chairs (65%) do not continue in administration, but return to faculty status where they remain until retirement. Like the springtime observations of wildflowers and dormant creatures, there is a sense of a natural, undirected process at work. The life cycle of chairs is emerging from faculty, being active briefly in the leadership of the institution and department, and returning to the faculty in a more dormant leadership state.

After serving for a while as academic leaders, do chairs feel plateaued at some point? After four years, six years, or more? There is not a set formula, however just being competent is not enough to keep the fire alive. Staying as a department chair too long results in losing interest in the job, failing to keep up with changes in your discipline, not keeping up with your scholarship and possibly entering a performance plateau – a chair doom loop (Gmelch & Miskin, 2011b; Gmelch, 2004; Hollander, 1991), as portrayed in Figure 2. New chairs enter Quadrant I with a steep learning curve as they learn new skills and find new interests. The “new chairs” progress to the “good chairs” as they become committed to the position and competent in their duties (Quadrant II). The confident chairs now in Quadrant II are careful not to go over the edge and down the slide to becoming a “damn chair” (Quadrant III) or a “doomed chair” (Quadrant IV). Chairs talk about the conditions that influenced the feeling of being plateaued in their position: the repetition and routine of tasks where the scenery starts looking the same; the rate of return on their investment of time and energy diminishing; a decline in their learning curve; an atrophy in their skills; and after time in the office for five or six years they felt they were not making a significant difference.

We know department chairs serve on the average six years and then head in any one of three directions: approximately 22% remain or move up in administration; 65% return back to their faculty positions; or 8% retire or expire in their position. Now the questions are: Why do department chairs leave their positions? How can they “leave right” and retain their legacy?
The research and practical advice regarding department chair exit is bleak to non-existent. However, Smith astutely outlined an exit strategy for the department chair. Our work supplements this with the qualitative answers to the why and how questions in leadership transition (Gmelch, 2014). We may know where department chairs go, but why do department chairs leave their position and how can they “leave right?” While the literature on these questions is silent, from interviews of 42 departing academic leaders we gained some insights. We first explore the “push” and “pull” factors motivating department chairs departure and then provides advice on how to “leave right.”

Very few academics have ever said, as they entered the academy: “I want to be a department chair.” But many, when they received the call from their dean or colleagues responded willing to serve their faculty, institution, and profession. When is it time to return to their roots or move on from their current position? What motivated them to leave? Two forces provided the impetus to “make a move.” Some internal forces pulled them to new challenges and other forces pushed them out of the position.

**Push Factors in the Decision to Leave**

- **Lack of support.** Given the difficult economic times, many chairs said they could not stay and watch their departments become dismantled due to diminishing financial resources and support. Over time chairs also make difficult decisions not always accepted by faculty. One department chair recommended: “Once you lose 51% of your faculty support you better develop an exit strategy.” You have to know when to get out – and not be like the frog sitting in a pot of water slowly approaching the boiling point – and expiring. You too will expire.

- **Incompatibility with the dean.** If chairs do not have the confidence or credibility with the dean, then they can’t lead. Some chairs felt low moral support from the dean and upper administration. If the dean did not value their leadership, the academic discipline, and/or their department, chairs said it was almost impossible to be effective under such conditions.

- **Poor job fit.** One provost asserted: “Not all excellent scholars make effective department chairs – some should stay in their labs for that is why we hired them.” If it takes 10,000 hours of practice to become an expert and only 3 percent of colleges and universities provide leadership training, then chairs are doomed from the beginning.

- **Poor Personal Fit:** In addition to IQ, chairs need EQ (emotional quotient) to survive (Buller, 2013). Personal fit requires the 3C’s of effective leadership: commitment, competence, and comfort. Faculty leaders must be committed to serve their colleagues

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**Figure 2**

The Chair Loop: "Zoom to Doom"
— to become servant leaders (Wheeler, 2011). Second, they must possess the *competence* in leadership to (1) build a community of scholars, (2) help them set direction, and (3) empower others to achieve their common goals and aspirations. Finally, personal fit comes from *comfort* with challenges and dealing with conflict.

**Pull Factors in the Decision to Leave.** Many department chairs claimed internal pull factors drew them back to the faculty, across to another institution as chair, or up to higher administration.

- *Returning to research agendas.* Most chairs have been socialized in their disciplines for over 16 years prior to their service as a department chair (Carroll, 1991). Their roots remained in their disciplines and many yearned to return before they lost the edge. In fact, the greatest stress experienced by department chairs is not conflict or dealing with administrivia, but: “Having insufficient time to stay current in my academic field.”

- *Met my milestones.* Chairs asked themselves, what do I want to have achieved in my tenure as chair? Once they have met their milestones, their legacy has been established and it is time to move on before one plateaus. One chair reflected, “After six years, I made the impact I wanted and if I stayed for another term my degree of impact would diminish.”

- *Looking for a new challenge.* After a few years sitting in the chair’s seat, the scenery starts looking the same. The by-monthly meetings with the dean address more mundane management issues than cutting-edge leadership opportunities. Some felt after spending five or six years in the office, they were not making a significant difference.

- *Slumping learning curve.* Most academics entered the academy because they wanted to be life-long learners. What better job than to be paid to learn and teach others. While the chair requirements have a steep learning curve, after a while the curve plateaus and the lack of intellectual stimulation from the “madness of meetings” and “administrivia” becomes deafening (Gmelch, Hopkins, & Damico, 2011).

A senior administrator provided sage advice on transition: “Be pulled, not pushed out of your position.” Another commented: “Never stay until you are asked to leave!”

### How to Leave Right

The departing academic leaders imparted dozens of pieces of sage advice for “leaving right.” The following six themes emerged from their sage advice on how to leave right (Gmelch, 2014).

1. *Pass the baton, not the gavel.* One chair used the metaphor of a relay race. He observed his son in a 4X100 relay race where he ran at full speed to pass the baton to the next runner and kept running after passing it along to ensure a smooth transition. In the same way, the transition to the next department chair should not be seen as the usual *passing the gavel* but *passing the baton* in a transition period whereby both the incumbent and incoming chair run together.

2. *Cross the finish line in a sprint.* Using the same track metaphor, another chair advised when you are approaching the end of your term, don’t slow down as you approach the finish line but end in a sprint. Demonstrate your commitment to your colleagues and department by finishing projects and cleaning up any messes to give the new chair a clean slate.

3. *Take care of others impacted by your exodus.* While most department chairs believed they were in control of their decision to make the next move, they realized others felt vulnerable with their departure. “Two groups are impacted more than others—staff and assistant professors” testified one chair. Most office staff serve at the pleasure of the chair and the chair’s departure may be met with some trepidation. In the same vein, untenured, adjunct, and term faculty may feel insecure with the change in leadership. What can you do to provide guidance or objective assurances to those most vulnerable in this time of transition?

4. *Regain “flow” time.* For department chairs who are returning to faculty, they need to regain control over their time. Shift from “fragmented” to “flow” time. As one departing administrator commented: “I used to think in ‘hours and minutes’ and now I see the future in terms of ‘seasons or semesters.’” Department chairs’ time has been characterized by brevity, variety, and fragmentation. In contrast, faculty time should be characterized as flow time which
is an optimal experience requiring clear focus, a set of goals, a sense of control over time, and immediate feedback – all with few distractions (Csikszentmihaly, 1990).

5. But this transition from fragmented to flow will take time. One academic leader realized the only thing he wrote in the last six months was his name. Another long serving administrator said he had to learn to read again – a reverse metamorphosis from memos to manuscripts. Transition back to teaching and research is difficult. All department chairs who have served five or six years should receive an automatic sabbatical to regain flow time after leaving the activity trap and fragmented time. Smith even suggests one semester of profession leave for 2-3 years of administrative service, 2 semesters for 4 or more years, and 3 semesters for over 8 years of service (2013).

6. Reflect on the legacy. Inevitably, chairs leave – they break or become out of date. Is it the chair’s destiny to return to scholarship or go on to higher levels of leadership? Before chairs leave, they may want to reflect on the difference they have made. What will others in the department think they have accomplished? Department chairs in the United States characterized their legacy as hiring right, building a positive and collegial culture, program advancement, quality staffing, and credible leadership.

In conclusion, following is some sage advice gleaned from the research findings (Gmelch & Kelly; Gmelch et al., 2017).

1. Wait until you have been promoted to full professor before you accept the chair position. The trend is alarming: whereas 80% of chairs were full professors in 1991, only 59% are today.

2. Be careful not to accept the chair position before you are tenured. In 1991, only 7.5% accepted the position without being tenured, however, today one-in-five (19.5%) faculty serve in administrative capacity before being tenured, possibly putting their tenure in jeopardy.

3. Accept the position for intrinsic reasons (to advance yourself and department) early enough to keep your options open if you want to move up in university administration.

4. Accept your position late enough so you have time to establish your academic credentials and credibility.

5. Since stress from balancing work-life demands plagues 64% of department chairs, remember to separate work and non-work activities so you maintain personal and professional balance.

6. Take time to learn the position. Only 41% of department chairs felt competent after the first nine months, and it took up to 2 years for another 40% to reach their level of competency. Unfortunately 19% took longer or never felt competent in their administrative position. Becoming a department chair is a journey – a journey many chairs fail to complete.

7. Develop a network of confidants outside your department – and inside your profession for operational guidance and future professional direction.

8. Seek a mentor chair to guide you through the initial white waters of leadership.

9. Consult significant others and family in your decision as having children at home to care for adds additional personal stress to the challenges of the job.

10. Create a golden parachute – negotiate an automatic sabbatical to regain currency in your discipline at the end of your administrative term.

A strategic starting point for chairs is to begin by writing their legacy: How would they want to be remembered by their colleagues? Did they make a difference? Did they leave a legacy? When we surveyed several hundred heads...
of departments in Australia, three themes emerged from their legacy statements: (1) We advanced our programs – our department is in a better place than before; (2) We advanced people – faculty and staff were promoted; and (3) We did it with decency (Gmelch & Sarros, 1996).

References


Smith, D.L. (2013). Negotiating the chair position’s terms of acceptance and exit. The Department Chair, 5-9.

