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# Shared Leadership: A Unique but Beneficial Arrangement within a University Department

## **Abstract**

Universities often lose some of their best teachers and researchers to transitions to administration. Conversely, the ability of universities to persuade some faculty to assume administrative duties is undermined due to faculty members' reluctance to give up teaching or research. In this article, two faculty members who currently serve as co-department heads discuss (a) their motivation for pursuing such an arrangement, (b) the way in which their duties are divided and shared, (c) challenges in pursuing the co-head arrangement, (d) challenges in implementing the co-head arrangement, (e) their perceptions of the success of the arrangement, and (f) significant considerations for those who may be interested in pursuing a similar arrangement.

## **Keywords**

shared leadership, collaborative leadership, higher education administration, departmental leadership, cooperative leadership

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# Shared Leadership: A Unique but Beneficial Arrangement within a University Department

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## Abstract

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In the fall of 2013, two faculty members in the Department of Psychology at Western Kentucky University (WKU), Dr. Steven Winger and Dr. Pitt Derryberry, were named as co-heads of the department. Universities often lose some of their best teachers and researchers to transitions to administration (Buller, 2009). Conversely, the ability of universities to persuade some faculty to assume administrative duties is undermined due to faculty members' reluctance to give up teaching or research in pursuit of a much different role (Achterberg, 2004). Drs. Winger and Derryberry explicitly advocated for this leadership arrangement. In doing so, they argued that such an approach to departmental leadership would solve both of these aforementioned problems.

In this article, Drs. Winger and Derryberry reflect in their own words the reasons and way in which this arrangement came to exist in their department and justification for its desirability over a single department head. They also explain the division of their duties as co-department heads, as well as their experiences concerning the challenges faced in pursuing and implementing the arrangement. The article concludes with their thoughts on the effectiveness of this approach and variables to be considered by organizations prior to pursuing this approach to leadership.

## The Motivation for Dual or Co-Department Heads

**Dr. Derryberry.** Although I had pondered the possibility of an administrative position, it was not something I had ever taken too seriously. The Psychology Department is one of the larger departments on campus, and a department head position is somewhat demanding. Similar to Steve, I was very reluctant to give up my teaching and research responsibilities, as these are central aspects of my professional identity. Furthermore, I have a young family, and I prioritize my time with them. Taking on a full-time administrative position would have jeopardized this time. However, the department faced an uncertain future, and Steve and I were – all of a sudden somehow – two of the senior members in the department. As such, I had a desire to have a role in directing the department. The opportunity to help lead the department, yet still have teaching and research responsibilities and also time for my family, was something I saw as too good to pass up.

**Dr. Winger.** I had served as the assistant department head for several years because I had an interest in administration and departmental leadership. In doing this, I realized that I could not give up teaching and research. I love teaching and research. It was hard

for me to imagine not being in the classroom or being unable to continue to run studies and mentor student researchers. The concept of co-department heads would allow me to continue to teach and conduct research while pursuing my interest in administration and departmental leadership. In addition, as the assistant department head, I saw firsthand how much time was required as department head, along with the myriad of tasks and new relationships that would need to be developed. Taking this on as an individual seemed daunting. Splitting these duties seemed much more feasible.

### The Division and Sharing of Duties

**Dr. Derryberry.** A chief reason why I chose to study psychology and ultimately pursue a Ph.D. in Educational Psychology has to do with my interest in the development of adolescents and young adults in general. Hence, it was a natural fit for me to take charge of the coordination of student advising. I coordinate all Academic Transition Programs (i.e., where prospective freshmen majors and transfers register for classes); meet with freshman psychology majors at the beginning of each year and check in with them periodically via email throughout the year; assign students to faculty advisors (including Dr. Winger and me); and am the designated “go between” for the department where all matters pertaining to advising are concerned.

My other primary responsibilities have to do with budgeting; student recruitment; assisting graduate program coordinators with graduate assistant awards and assignments; responding to all web and mail related inquiries to the department; and preparing reports having to do with action plans, accreditation, General Education, and yearly closing the loop.

**Dr. Winger.** I am independently in charge of (a) scheduling, planning, and running department meetings; (b) creating course schedules; (c) hiring, assisting, and evaluating adjunct and dual credit instructors; and (d) undergraduate curriculum matters: independent studies, transfer equivalencies, study abroad approvals, honor’s augmentations, program exceptions, change of grades, registration exception appeals, departmental curriculum committee, college curriculum committee, student award identification, and catalog revisions. I had served on the undergraduate program committee for over a decade and had chaired that committee for several years. I felt quite invested in the undergraduate program and had several ideas for improving it. This led to my commitment to

oversee course scheduling and undergraduate curriculum matters.

Having a Ph.D. in Educational Psychology, I am also very interested in facilitating improvement in teaching. This interest led me to take on the hiring, assisting, and evaluation of adjuncts and dual credit instructors. I have implemented a new observation and evaluation system that focuses on formative feedback. I have also formed and am chairing a new committee whose charge is to develop learning modules over key concepts for our teaching assistants, adjuncts, and dual credit instructors.

**Shared responsibilities.** Drs. Winger and Derryberry share the following duties: (a) attending department head retreats or workdays; (b) annual faculty evaluations, workload agreements, tenure/promotion decisions, and hiring of full-time faculty; and (c) attendance at student or faculty recognition events.

### Challenges in the Pursuit of the Co-Head Arrangement

**Dr. Derryberry.** It was not difficult to convince college and university administration that this was a model worth pursuing. However, working out the financial details of our contract was a challenge. Altogether we were not asking for more than what a department head typically receives at WKU, but we wanted to ensure that compensation would not be less for the position simply because the position was being shared. It took patience from both us and the administration in achieving this. An important step in this process that went a long way in ensuring that all parties were happy with our compensation package was the decision to base our administrative stipend on a 10-month package rather than 11-month. This is a unique aspect of the co-head arrangement because it allows us to capitalize on certain summer opportunities (i.e., teaching, research, or family time) that otherwise would not be there if we were full-time administrators.

**Dr. Winger.** The internal aspects of dividing the duties was not challenging for the two of us. There were needed clarifications with the dean with regard to whom would be the point person for shared duties such as faculty handbook issues and how we would handle vacation days. The larger difficulties surfaced with contract wording and compensation. It took several months to reword the contract so that HR, the vice president, and dean were comfortable with the wording and to agree on a fair compensation package.

## Challenges in the Implementation of the Co-Head Arrangement

**Dr. Derryberry.** The main challenge is there is no precedent for this at the university. Steve and I are on our own in navigating this. There actually have been some instances that have arisen where Steve and I have been uncertain ourselves as to whom is supposed to handle something. Fortunately, our offices are next door to each other so these instances are easy enough to figure out.

**Dr. Winger.** It is hard to remove the department head hat. Others always approach you with items pertaining to department head duties. Even though you're a part-time administrator, you are approached with items all the time. Second, even though our duties are explicitly noted via a table we distribute and post on our website, some are challenged with regard to remembering our distinct duties and approach us with duties that belong to the other person on a regular basis. Third, because we like to consult each other about difficult or important decisions, it may take us a bit longer to make a decision. Last, sometimes it is hard to remember that you are a half-time administrator and that it is OK to go home before the university closes some days, take a half day off periodically, or take multiple days off during the summer.

## How Has the Co-Head Arrangement Worked Out?

**Dr. Derryberry.** The major pro was personal for me in that I did not have to give up teaching and my research agenda. Additionally, I have not had to sacrifice family time. I have also been relieved to see that for the most part staff, faculty, and other administrators have been quick to figure out our "two-headed" system. I feel that there have been benefits beyond just how I am impacted, though. I think the co-head arrangement has contributed to a greater sense of community within the department. No one specific person is "in charge." My guess is that our model helps to reinforce the notion that everyone has specific responsibilities that must be met if the department is to be successful.

One fear we had was that this co-head arrangement could slow things down. I believe the opposite has happened. Our department has grown at a rate I never expected. Our BA program has close to 400 majors, and we have close to 40 graduate students enrolled in our master's level programs. In the one and a half years since we have officially been co-heads, we significantly revised

our BA program, established a new mission and vision for the department, created a new approach to program assessment, created a new collaborative undergraduate minor program, and developed a new tenure and promotion system. During this time we also oversaw and assisted, where possible, our graduate program coordinators in their pursuit, proposal, and ultimate addition of a Psy.D. program, which necessitated two new faculty hires this past academic year and two more for the current year.

From the start, Steve and I were diligent in identifying who is doing what. In so doing, we tried to align ourselves with those areas that pertained to our strengths and/or interests. The end result is that those numerous areas that define the role of the department head get more specialized attention. I believe that more is accomplished because of this.

**Dr. Winger.** I can still teach and do research. I can take care of administrative duties that I am most interested in or better suited for as an individual. I have been able to develop relationships with staff members around campus who deal with issues that I am more knowledgeable about and more interested in. Because we like to consult each other about difficult or important decisions, it forces us to slow down and reflect on the decisions more prior to communicating a response (i.e., we make better decisions). We also benefit from being able to consider additional factors with regard to important decisions that, as an individual leader, we may not have identified.

We have taken advantage of our unique strengths for dealing with specific issues. As most contingency theories of leadership suggest, each situation calls for a certain leadership approach (Hughes, Ginnett, & Curphy, 1998). The advantage of co-heads is that we can designate the leader with the most suitable skill set to handle a given issue (i.e., best fit). Because we are able to focus on the issues or duties we are most interested in, we pursue them with more enthusiasm. This leads to greater productivity and hopefully longevity.

## Considerations for Those Interested in Pursuing a Co-Head Arrangement

**Dr. Derryberry.** The success of this model really is the result of a perfect storm of conditions. An important part of this storm was our history together at WKU, along with our similar life circumstances. Steve and I began at this university at the same time. We both have Ph.D.s in Educational Psychology. We are similar in age (1 year

difference) and have very similar family lives. We both achieved tenure and promotions at similar times. We are both from similar geographic regions. We share similar interests, both professionally and personally. Given all of these factors, we established a strong working relationship in our first decade at WKU.

When there became a need for a new department head to be hired internally, it was no surprise that we both shared the same concerns about the department's future and had the same goals for it. Given our history here, it also was unsurprising that we both had a desire to help lead the department. Yet, as a result of our identity as teachers and researchers, not to mention our commitment to our family lives, neither of us wanted to take the reins alone. Steve was the first to bring up the possibility of leading the department as a tandem in our conversations, and I jumped at the idea (especially since I had spent a little time wondering to myself if such an arrangement would be possible). The rest as they say is history. Given all that Steve and I have experienced at WKU together, as well as all we have in common, I was confident that the idea would work.

I can unequivocally say, however, that I do not think I could have pursued such a model with anyone else. An organization should be cautious before hiring two people for the same leadership position. Doing so has to be under the right circumstances and conditions. There is too much that Steve and I have in common. Neither of us possesses much of an ego, and *our focus is always on what is best for the department and the students it serves, rather than what is best for us*. We realize what leading the department in this manner has allowed us to maintain, and we have a good understanding about why it is necessary for this department to have this approach to its leadership. If our philosophies about leadership or our goals for this department were not congruent, I do not believe that such a tandem would work. At the very least, it would not work as well as I believe this one has.

**Dr. Winger.** If you have faculty members who have an interest in administration but are reluctant to give up teaching or research, this is a great compromise. Also, in dire financial situations where upper administration will only agree to an internal hire for a department head, this arrangement creates a more flexible option. It is important to realize that this arrangement is contingent upon the right fit. Pitt and I have a high level of respect for each other. We are both task focused and constantly searching for ways to improve. We have a similar vision for what our department should be. We also share similar professional and personal values. We have a balanced

blend of interests and strengths that allowed for an even split of duties. We balance each other out in a synergistic way that results in a leadership team where two half-time leaders are greater than one full-time leader.

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