

# REVITALIZING THE DEPARTMENT CHAIR

## Ten Recommendations to Make the Role More Attractive, Powerful, and Effective

by Richard P. McAdams

**T**he role of the department chair is critically important, yet undervalued. As universities and colleges increasingly emphasize research and national reputation, the academic standards departments and individual faculty must meet become ever more daunting. And meeting higher standards demands strong departmental leadership. At the same time, ironically, departmental status and concerns with promotion lead many excellent faculty members to conclude that service as department chair is a career dead end, or at least a serious detour.

What can be done to make the position of department chair both challenging and attractive to our best faculty members?

In November 1995, Provost Al Pense appointed a Department Chair Task Force to study the position at Lehigh University. In his charge to that task force, he asked:

➤ What further incentives should Lehigh consider to make the position of department chair more attractive to talented faculty?

➤ Should Lehigh provide chairs with more training; if so, what kind?

➤ Should Lehigh consider assigning chairs more powers and responsibilities in the area of budget management? Salary determination? Other areas? If so,

which ones?

Immediately, our task force recognized that the scope of discussion needed to broaden. During our first meeting, we agreed that enhancing leadership aspects of the position would offer the greatest incentive, and we identified specific strategies to emphasize such leadership qualities as vision, planning, and development of faculty and programs. We also identified strategies to address necessary management initiatives.

At the conclusion of our work, we presented our report to the provost and the Academic Affairs Committee of the Board of Trustees. It included the following nine specific recommendations (accompanied here by brief commentary) designed to empower chairs to have a more significant impact on the achievement of the university's mission.

### OUR RECOMMENDATIONS

#### Leadership Dimension

##### 1. Approve a new job description that places a greater

*Richard P. McAdams is assistant professor of educational leadership at Lehigh University, Mountaintop Campus, 111 Research Drive, Bethlehem, PA 18015-4793; rpm4@lehigh.edu. He was chair of the task force described in his article.*

**emphasis on the leadership aspects of the chair position rather than on its management tasks.**

The job description we recommended (see box) explicitly requires chairs to develop a vision and mission for the department, and to proactively plan for positive change to enhance the department, both within the university and in the wider academic world. It also enumerates management competencies, which are necessary but not sufficient criteria for effectiveness as a chair at Lehigh.

**2. Promote greater autonomy for department chairs in the day-to-day operations of their departments — principally through greater control of their departmental budgets.**

The leadership potential inherent in their position can be realized only if department chairs are delegated significant amounts of authority and responsibility. Chairs need early confirmation of budget amounts for the coming academic year, and authorization to carry over unspent funds into the next budget year for specific projects or capital items.

**3. Promote leadership excellence for department chairs through an ambitious program for chair orientation and continuous development.**

We recommended that several campus-wide meetings for chairs be held during each academic year around issues such as faculty development and evaluation, staff motivation, and program development and evaluation. Department chairs should have a major role in developing the agendas for these sessions. Chairs also should be supported to attend regional and national conferences specifically targeted toward building their skills and competencies (for additional detail on this recommendation, see the box "Chair Development and Support").

**4. Facilitate the integration of the departmental goal-setting process with the goals of the individual colleges and the Lehigh University Strategic Plan.**

The new leadership expectations for department chairs imply that chairs will play a more prominent role in college-wide goal setting, and will be able to more closely align the vision for their own departments with the overall mission of the university.

**Management Dimension**

**5. Provide ample administrative and clerical support to department chairs to enable them to concentrate their energies on the higher-level leadership functions of their positions.**

Department chair members of the task force reported having to devise varied methods for dealing with their administrative burdens. We recommended that appropriate remunerated administrative assistance be provided to all chairs. The needs in this area vary greatly among departments; to determine the degree of administrative assistance needed in each case requires careful analysis.

**6. Develop an appropriate and equitable compensation system for department chairs.**

Current compensation practices for department chairs vary among departments throughout the university. The committee rec-

ommended that all chairs receive at least a ten-month contract by the 1997-98 academic year. The year-round nature of a chair's responsibilities is set forth in the existing manual for chairs and is inherent in their duties. Indeed, the chair position involves substantial responsibilities over the summer months. With this in

mind, eleven-month contracts for department chairs should become the university norm as soon as practicable.

**7. There should be a formal annual meeting between the dean and each chair to discuss the progress of each department in achieving its**

*Excerpt from the task force's report*

**POSITION DESCRIPTION: DEPARTMENT CHAIR**

The chair oversees the operation and evolution of a department — the fundamental academic unit within the university. In doing so, the chair has two broad areas of responsibility: leadership and management.

The chair guides the long-range development of the department within the context of university and college plans. The chair ensures that the department's evolution resonates with external changes in the discipline, and that the department maintains a sense of place within the university and in the broader context of higher education. To do so, the chair needs to maintain contact with alumni, with the departmental Visiting Committee, with chairs of related departments, and with other professionals in the field. Chairs should attend national meetings annually to facilitate interaction with other chairs in their discipline. The chair provides the primary voice for a department's vision and development to students, administration, alumni, and donors.

A chair has numerous opportunities to shape the vision and evolution of the department. Fundamental to activities that ultimately enhance a department's stature and competitive position is development of a strategic plan that defines a clear sense of direction. The successful chair is able to build faculty and student support for the plan even though it may move the department toward unfamiliar intellectual ground. The chair articulates the department's goals and needs within the university, and works with the Development Office to advance the department's programs externally. Because a department's reputation is built upon the quality of its faculty, the chair must take an active role in faculty hiring and in post-recruitment faculty development.

The chair manages the department. Carrying out this responsibility, the chair oversees, directly or indirectly, the daily progression of teaching, research, and service within the department. It is the responsibility of the faculty, under the chair's leadership, to see that students are adequately prepared for access to a useful professional life. To this end, the chair, in conjunction with the department's Visiting Committee, provides the dean and provost with program plans and estimates of resources needed to carry out the functions of the department.

The chair's particular management functions are many. Responsibility for some of these functions may be delegated to other faculty, an associate chairperson, departmental academic coordinator, or budgetary officer, as appropriate. The functions include: oversight of undergraduate and graduate programs (curricula, advising, student recruitment, and instructional assignments for both faculty and teaching assistants); budget planning and accounting; programmatic and budgetary coordination with other academic units including departments, centers, and institutes; equipment procurement; oversight of building maintenance; supervision of safety programs; and communication with the department's Visiting Committee. The chair has sole responsibility over department personnel issues, including faculty evaluations, reviews, reappointments, promotions, and tenure decisions; support staff evaluations, reviews, and promotions; and salary administration for both groups. ■

During our first meeting, we agreed that enhancing leadership aspects of the position would offer the greatest incentive, and we identified specific strategies to emphasize such leadership qualities as vision, planning, and development of faculty and programs.

*Excerpt from the task force's report*

### **CHAIR DEVELOPMENT AND SUPPORT**

Support for the department chair should strive to enhance the chair's effectiveness in his/her leadership role and in the managerial and administrative aspects of the position. "Growth of each of Lehigh's departments on a national level will only be achieved if chairs have the opportunity to devote a sufficient portion of their attention to long-range planning and the development of their departments. This requires opportunities for chairs to benchmark their performance and that of their departments in both external and internal educational contexts." The breakfast meetings for new chairs are a valuable first step in the internal professional growth process. Other steps that should be taken are:

1. Support for chairs to attend at least one national meeting to interact with other chairs in their field. This will provide valuable insights to chairs regarding the stature of their department on a national level as well as objectives and practices at their peer departments. This should be required as part of a chair's position description. Incentives for Lehigh chairs to host meetings of this nature, even on a regional level, are also recommended.

2. An annual department chair retreat with presentations by nationally noted speakers should be part of the chair development process. Speakers should include representatives from major national funding agencies as well as authorities on management and/or administrative practices. A breakout or workshop format could also be used to explore opportunities for interdepartmental collaboration and interdisciplinary funding opportunities.

3. From an internal perspective, Lehigh should sponsor at least one meeting per semester for its department chairs to discuss matters of mutual interest. The meetings would provide a forum for chairs to talk among themselves and with Lehigh administrators about common operational issues - effective hiring, dealing with Visiting Committees of the Board of Trustees, mentoring new faculty and assisting senior faculty with career redirection, generating discretionary funding - and about strategies which individual chairs have discovered for dealing with them. Presentations by chairs on activities or operational procedures they use for addressing these issues would be a regular part of these meetings. This activity essentially provides continuity with the "new chairs" meetings and would provide for a cross-fertilization of good ideas for department operation and development among all departments on campus.

4. The current level of administrative support for chairs varies widely among departments. In some cases the amount of routine paperwork which the chair has to administer threatens to make the position little more than that of a manager. Therefore, we recommend that some degree of remunerated administrative assistance be provided to all chairs. Depending on the size and composition of the department, such assistance might take the form of an assistant to the chair (staff position), an associate chair (faculty position), or a departmental coordinator. The duties assigned to this assistant will differ according to departmental needs, although personnel issues should still remain the purview of the chair. Remuneration for faculty who provide such assistance could be in the form of extra compensation, release time, or both, as is the case in some of our peer departments at other universities. ■

**goals. A more extensive review should take place every three years, at the time of the reappointment of a chair for a new three-year term.**

Chairs should be evaluated in terms of their own performances and the progress of their departments toward set departmental goals. The review criteria should include the chair job description and the specific goals established by each department for the current year. Each college and department should provide for faculty input into this evaluation.

The review process should be expanded every third year of a department chair's term to include data gathered from the wider university community, including input on departmental performance from students, staff, and alumni, as well as a more detailed review by the department's faculty. External peer review by similar departments in other universities could also be a part of this third-year review, as should a self-evaluation by the department chair. Such an extensive evaluation process facilitates the decision whether to reappoint an incumbent chair.

### **8. Establish periodic opportunities to celebrate the achievements of individual departments within the college or university community.**

Recognition of exemplary departments is closely related to the evaluation process. The task force recommended that each year several departments be celebrated for their especially notable achievements as a department. Such recognition could take the form of a yearly citation or a plaque presented by a high-level university official at one of the scheduled department chair meetings called for in our report. One or two department chairs also should be invited to each regular Academic Affairs Committee

**Our experiences demonstrate that a proactive administration and  
a collaborative faculty can respond successfully  
to seemingly intractable challenges.**

meeting to report on significant departmental activities and achievements. Each year one or two of these departments should be selected to make a subsequent presentation to the full Board of Trustees.

**9. The Department Chair Task Force should be chartered for one additional year to serve as a transition to a more permanent mechanism for implementing the recommendations of the committee.**

The task force asked to be authorized to meet again during the next academic year for the major task of creating a permanent group — a standing faculty committee or a chairs' forum. That new group will plan the annual meetings and retreat called for in the report, and support and assist in Lehigh's implementation of the report's other recommendations. This group should regularly coordinate its activities with the provost and should report periodically to the Academic Affairs Committee.

## **PROGRESS REPORT**

The Department Chair Task Force presented its report to the Academic Affairs Committee of the Board of Trustees in June 1996. The report was very well received, and we were immediately chartered to continue our work for an additional year — thus fulfilling recommendation 9.

By September 1996, Provost Pense had met with his Provost's Council (the deans of Lehigh's four colleges) to discuss the remaining eight recommendations. In October 1996, he reported to the Academic Affairs Committee the results of the Council's discussions: complete acceptance of the following recommendations:

1. Chair job description.
3. Chair orientation and continuous development.

4. Integration of department and colleges/university goals.

6. Chair compensation system (ten-month contracts have already been implemented).

7. Annual, more sophisticated chair/department evaluations.

8. Recognition of departmental achievements.

The provost and deans supported the rationales for recommendations 2 and 5, but said that much more discussion of them is necessary before we can expect a mutually agreeable resolution. Such a reaction is not surprising, since recommendations 2 and 5 deal with major redistributions of power and money within the university and imply significant allocations of new financial resources. Also, the portion of recommendation 6 dealing with the possibility of eleven-month contracts has yet to be addressed. This is another issue with significant financial implications.

## **The Chairs React**

We met as a task force several times during the fall 1996 term to refine our original recommendations and to plan for the conversion of the task force to a permanent committee of department chairs. Up to this point, only the four department chairs on the task force (of twenty-nine chairs on campus) had been involved in formulating the recommendations. Our task now was to present those recommendations to all the department chairs, explain their rationales, and determine whether or not Lehigh's other department chairs were interested in forming the permanent committee called for in recommendation 9.

Initially, of course, the chairs were somewhat skeptical about the administration's commitment to the recommendations; and, naturally, they were reluctant to form one more university committee that might or might not prove

useful. The task force report was sent to all chairs in November 1996, and a meeting of all chairs to discuss the recommendations was scheduled for December 1996.

This December meeting was attended by twenty-four of the twenty-nine Lehigh chairs. The provost was also present to convey his commitment to the recommendations and to the concept of a permanent committee of department chairs. A very thorough and healthy two-hour discussion ensued, featuring the questions, comments, and suggestions of the chairs in attendance. **An additional recommendation, that a department chair serve on the Board's Academic Affairs Committee, received unanimous support.**

By the end of the meeting there was consensus that the chairs, as a group, both endorsed and appreciated the work of the task force during the past year. The group agreed unanimously that a seven-member permanent committee should be established, and elections will be held early in 1997. This new committee will be expected to monitor and assist in the implementation of the task force recommendations already accepted by Lehigh's administration. It also will work with the provost and deans to address recommendations 2 and 5, dealing with the redistribution of power and budgets, which will require careful thought and analysis.

## **A Positive Experience**

Our experiences demonstrate that a proactive administration and a collaborative faculty can respond successfully to seemingly intractable challenges. In this initiative to revitalize the role of the department chair at Lehigh, there is every indication that the provost's initial goal to enhance the position's role and status will be met and even surpassed.