

LETTER TO A NEWLY-INVITED DEPARTMENT CHAIR

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Dear Friend,

Congratulations! I was delighted to learn that you were invited by your Dean this week to serve as the next chair of your department. This is a wonderful reflection of the respect and esteem in which you're held by your colleagues. I also heard, though, that you're still unsure about whether to accept this invitation. I recently completed five years as department chair myself. Both beforehand and along the way I spent lots of time thinking about the sorts of issues you're probably considering right now, so if you'll excuse my presumptuousness, perhaps I might share with you some of my own experiences in the hope that it's helpful as you make your decision.

I should say at the start that I fully understand your hesitation. Taking on this job would mean additional stress and far less time to do much of the research and teaching work that defines you as a scholar. I also don't want to pretend that I'm in any way an authority on this topic or even that I was an especially effective chair. Although you'd need to ask my colleagues to get an unbiased account, I think it's fair to say I was fine. I had some successes in the job and some failures. But, I survived, took the job seriously, didn't break too much along the way, attended the very kind farewell event my colleagues held to say thank-you, and then took some time off to recover, recharge, and ruminate over the next steps in my academic career. Therefore, I believe I can at least provide you with an initial frame of reference about some key issues involved in departmental administration and whether it might be right for you.

Why You Should (Probably) Agree to Serve as Chair

Let's cut to the chase. Should you do it? Whenever I get asked some version of this question, my answer tends to be pretty simple: "Yes, probably." When I was a doctoral student, I had a memorable conversation with my advisor and mentor, Don Hambrick¹. I think we had just gone

¹ Alert readers may already note that this article and its title are an homage to Don's famous "Letter to a Newly-Tenured Associate Professor," which he published in *Journal of Management Inquiry* in 2005.

through a change in department chairs at Penn State (a place that always seems to manage these transitions well), so I was curious about when and why one should agree to serve as chair when asked. My younger self was a bit too self-absorbed for his own good and couldn't quite grasp why a productive scholar would agree to take on a role like this when they didn't have to. Don's response has stayed with me ever since. I'm paraphrasing here, but he essentially said: "At some point in your career, your colleagues will come to you and ask you to serve as department chair. Assuming you're able to do so, you should accept when it's your turn. You don't have to say yes if you're clearly not ready (more on this below), you only have to say yes to a single term, you don't have to say yes to college-wide roles like associate dean or dean, but it's a senior faculty member's obligation to serve as department chair at least once in their career."

The older I've become, the more this comment has resonated with me and the more I see both the wisdom and the commitment to shared faculty governance it reflects. So, in 2016, when I was invited to be department chair, I said yes. Was it the right choice? That's a tricky one to answer. We can never run a true counterfactual, and I can't tell you if this was the 'correct' decision, either at the time or in retrospect. Nonetheless, hand on heart, my five years as department chair were, by far, the most meaningful five years of my entire adult life. This doesn't mean they weren't stressful (reader, they were), but I will always be grateful I accepted the invitation to serve as chair as it gave me a platform and an opportunity to support my colleagues in a way I would never have been able to in my regular faculty role.

The one situation where I usually urge caution is when it's not yet an individual's 'turn,' such as when a scholar is earlier in their career and there are established senior faculty in the department who have not yet served in the role and don't have a good reason for not doing so. Relatedly, although it's not essential, I *strongly* encourage people to have reached the rank of full

professor prior to taking on the department chair role. This isn't a hard-and-fast rule, of course. Some of the best chairs I've ever worked with have been associate professors, and being an associate doesn't preclude you from doing the job (I was an associate for four of my five years as chair). However, not being a full professor can make many aspects of the job anywhere from slightly more difficult to flat-out impossible. Full professors tend to have more experience with many of the most central elements of the job (e.g., evaluating faculty for promotion and tenure; taking advantage of internal and external professional networks), they're usually more familiar with the inner workings of high-profile committees, and some college and university committees are only open to full professors. And, ultimately, there is always the delicate issue of what one might call moral authority when you're an associate professor as department chair and you have to discuss contentious and/or status-related issues with a more senior (full professor) colleague. Most of this becomes a whole lot simpler when you're at the same rank.

Of course, if you happen to be part of that awe-inspiring-but-infuriating subset of department chairs who are seemingly able to take on the job without missing a beat or slowing down at all in any other aspect of their research, teaching, and professional service, then the decision should be an easy one, irrespective of your rank. Some chairs manage to float above the stresses of the job with the equanimity of gods and time-management skills that would make a brave person weep. If that's you, then you have my admiration, my applause, and my envy. I have nothing further to offer you. Please write back and tell me how you do it.

Negotiating Your Role

Assuming that you're willing to move forward, your next step should be a detailed conversation with your Dean to hash out the specifics and expectations of the role. Formally, you'll probably be offered some combination of an administrative stipend and/or a teaching reduction. At some

schools there's very little room for negotiation here, whether because of union contracts, strong local norms, and/or budgetary constraints. At most schools, though, candidates for administrative roles have at least some flexibility. I encourage you to be politely insistent here. The good news is that, now you're in this position, there's been quite a bit of momentum building. The university's on board, your colleagues are on board, and I'm certain that your Dean would love nothing more than to seal the deal and move on to the hundreds of other things on their plate. Therefore, it's OK to ask for one or more additional considerations if you can make a reasonable case for how these will help you be a more effective department chair and scholar.

Your predecessor will be a good source of advice when preparing for this conversation, as will the other department chairs in the college. Personally, I've always thought that a helpful guide is the old saw, "begin with the end in mind." A common trap is to focus too closely on the time when you'll be chair (3-5 years is typical for a first term). Instead, I believe the most critical time is actually the 2-3 years immediately after your term ends. This will be a period where you'll have to balance quite a bit while also trying to quickly return to pre-chair business as usual. You'll be somewhat worn out from the job, your successor and other administrators will still need your input on a wide range of issues, you'll return to a full teaching load, and, most critically, you'll be wanting to ramp up your research program again after the inevitable lull. My recommendation here is to look into the future and ask yourself what might make life easier as you deal with all this. For example, if your university offers a total teaching reduction of X classes over a three-year term as chair, you might ask to instead spread X out over 4-5 years. That way, in the first 1-2 years back, you would continue to have a reduced load. Although this means life will be (even) busier when you're department chair, it will make life simpler on the back end. If you have an especially generous Dean, or you're an especially good negotiator, you

might even be able to have your cake and eat it, too (i.e., keep the standard, per-year teaching reduction going both during your term as chair and for 1-2 years afterward).

You could use a similar approach with summer research grants if you have these. As you come to the end of your term, it's likely that your recent productivity will have decreased and your pipeline will be emptying out. Therefore, a good suggestion I've heard from a few fellow chairs is to negotiate for a certain number of guaranteed summer grants, beginning with the summer you return to the regular faculty. You might even be able to ask for a sabbatical/leave of absence in the semester or year after you leave the role. I was able to do something like this myself and it was instrumental in helping me regain my energy and enthusiasm for academia.

Day-to-day Experiences

What's the day-to-day experience as department chair actually like? The best analogy I can give is that of a construction vehicle. Over the last 5-10 years, we've seen a ton of new buildings going up on the Notre Dame campus, with a painfully high percentage of these being within comfortable earshot of the business school. Although this has made our generous donors much happier when they return to campus, woe betide the unfortunate faculty member working in their office while the construction is going on nearby. You know the drill. You're sitting there, thinking profound thoughts, coming up with the perfect response to that annoying Reviewer #3, and then...beep-beep-beep-beep. Some truck starts reversing. This breaks your concentration, evokes low-grade angst, and forces you to re-focus. Eventually, the truck stops moving, the beeping stops, and you get back to work. Until...beep-beep-beep-beep...and so on. A sensible faculty member, when faced with this ongoing challenge, would close their door and window, put on a good pair of noise-cancelling headphones, and play some white noise in the background.

Problem solved. The best way I can describe being department chair is that it's like this but without the option of noise-cancelling headphones.

My point here, though, isn't that you should be trying to purchase noise-cancelling headphones. Distractions like this aren't the exception; they're the job itself. All sorts of one-off things come up on a daily and weekly basis. However, if it's not on your plate then it's probably on someone else's who presumably isn't in an administrative role. True emergencies in academia are rare, in that no one is likely to run into your office with a life-threatening problem (well, that does happen sometimes, but it's mercifully infrequent). However, there are a whole range of legitimate issues that can deeply affect how people view their jobs, their professional identities, and their lives. Whether or not we label these situations as emergencies, they're undoubtedly important to those experiencing them and we should always try to treat them with the respect, gravity, and timeliness they deserve. By extension, I believe we should be very careful to ensure that, in attempting to optimize our own efficiency and time management, we don't lose sight of the reason we're actually in the job in the first place.

What then becomes difficult is that you no longer have the same level of access to large, uninterrupted blocks of time. I'm a bit of a procrastinator (OK, a lot of a procrastinator), so I usually need time to get settled, get distracted, get up, surf the internet, reply to an email, get distracted again, and then finally, painfully, reluctantly, start the task I've set for myself that day. After a little while, though, the beguiling magic of Csikszentmihalyi and his flow begins to envelop me, and progress ensues. If this resonates with you, it's going to be one of your challenges as chair because, seemingly without fail, just as you've got through the messing-around phase and you're about to break into flow, that metaphorical construction vehicle will start beeping – a phone call, an email, a scheduled meeting, an unscheduled knock at the door.

Although there are a range of creative possible solutions to this – the ‘Pomodoro’ technique of working in 25-minute chunks is an especially good one, at least in theory – none of these ever truly worked for me. Ultimately, I found that I needed to re-think the core building blocks of my research and teaching, and I had to become comfortable with some of the explicit and implicit trade-offs this entailed, including the research projects I worked on and the other professional activities I was able to participate in.

General Guiding Principles

Moving beyond the day-to-day, there’s a veritable cornucopia of different activities and issues that you will, should, or could end up becoming involved in as chair. I can’t do even the slightest justice to all or most of these here, so I’ll just focus on a few general ideas. I especially want to encourage you to identify what you see as your core management/leadership principles. This can be thought of as your ‘True North,’ or guiding heuristic/s when you’re inevitably faced with too much to do and too little time to do it in. For example, a department chair I admire here at Notre Dame takes a teleological approach. Her focus is on taking actions that she believes will optimize the likelihood of faculty eventually being promoted to the rank of full professor.

My own approach was more metaphorical in that I liked to think of my job at its core as comprising twin roles: the umbrella and the springboard. The umbrella role was to shield faculty from unnecessary minutiae and administrivia so that they could focus on their primary roles as researchers and teachers. The springboard component involved providing support, resources, and recognition as necessary to achieve this. In other words, the umbrella was so people had time and space to make a positive difference, while the springboard was to optimize the extent to which there was a positive difference to make. Both of these roles were driven by my unabashed belief that faculty are usually the best ones to decide how to spend their own time, that ‘self-interest-

seeking with guile' is rare, and that my colleagues were independent, motivated, trustworthy, and committed to the success of our university. Although, admittedly, this doesn't describe absolutely everyone in our field, I'm now even more convinced that it does describe the large majority and that we should always work on the assumption that it's true until shown otherwise.

The umbrella role might not be quite as intuitive as the springboard role, so let me say a bit more about this one. This was driven in part by what I call the 'taken-for-grantedness fallacy.' In essence, I've found that the further administrators and others get from a research project or classroom, the more they're likely to fall into the trap of assuming that everything will continue to run smoothly *and* that faculty will be able to make whatever changes or additions they're proposing to a routine. Sometimes this is true, but mostly it feels like the opposite. High-quality research and high-quality teaching take a *lot* of time. It's quite reasonable to expect excellence in both, but not if we're constantly taking up more and more of people's time and mental energy with new policies, procedures, initiatives, systems, rules, requirements, themes, and so on. Many department chairs simply pass on all of these things to their faculty when they come down from the college, university, or state legislature. If at all possible, though, fight the good fight and get in the way. Note that this isn't about being mindlessly obstructionist; instead, it's about empathizing with how a given change to a faculty member's routine is likely to affect their behavior and ultimate productivity. And when you add something meaningful to someone's plate, try to think seriously about what else you might be able to take off that plate at the same time. Although it will feel like you're playing whack-a-mole a lot of the time, I guarantee that your faculty will thank you and that they'll be more effective researchers and teachers.

The easiest way to be an umbrella, of course, is to not put unnecessary burdens in people's way yourself. A simple way to do this is through your approach to meetings. In theory,

faculty meetings can be extremely valuable because they're the beating heart of faculty governance, they provide a forum to air, internalize, and integrate diverse perspectives on complex topics, and they can serve as the touchstones of an intellectual community. In practice, though, many academic meetings are less than useless because they're glorified bulletin boards and used to simply transmit information that should have been sent by email (or not at all). Additionally, they reduce the ability of faculty to schedule blocks of uninterrupted time, and they can be hijacked by powerful, entrenched, and/or objectionable faculty, further suppressing the voices of already-disenfranchised junior colleagues. Happily, as chair, it's often up to you to decide whether to call a meeting or not. Use this power wisely, judiciously, and sparingly.

Getting Started

As in many leadership roles, the early transition phase (call it the first 100 days or so) is often disproportionately important for symbolic and substantive reasons, so I'll end with a few brief thoughts on this time period. The transition phase might be even *more* important in university environments. We academics are creatures of habit and inertia, but if we're ever going to be receptive to change and disruption it's usually following a leadership transition. That said, your approach here should be driven heavily by the idiosyncratic circumstances that you're stepping into, which are likely to be unique to your institution, college, department history, resource position, faculty structure, key personnel, and so on. All starting points have different pros and cons. Some departments could do with quite a shake-up, others would benefit from some targeted tweaks here and there, while yet others are beautiful, well-oiled machines. It'll be up to you to decide what you're stepping into.

In my own case, because of some upheaval and structural changes, it turned out that I was the fifth department chair for the faculty in my department in just 12 months. Moreover, the two

most senior endowed chairs in our department left around the time I took over, we lost two other strong junior faculty soon after, and we were dealing with several sensitive personnel issues. After some discussions with trusted colleagues and some navel-gazing, I decided that I should focus on creating stability, enhancing faculty identification with our department, strengthening relationships among faculty, and recruiting effectively to replace our departing colleagues. For instance, one of the first tasks I undertook was to speak individually with every one of the 30+ full-time faculty members in our department to ask their opinions and get their feedback. Even though I already knew all my colleagues, these meetings were invaluable in helping me understand what people saw as the opportunities and challenges we were facing. I learned the most from one simple question: “what would you do if you had the job I’m stepping into now?” I also began a weekly departmental newsletter to highlight the wide range of different activities faculty were working on, started up a new optional monthly social event, and introduced several new forms of faculty recognition and appreciation. Basically, I tried to focus on identifying, incentivizing, and rewarding prosocial behavior, with the aim of working with my colleagues to build a stronger sense of community within our department.

Good Luck!

In summary, congratulations on being invited to serve as department chair. Although it’s a stressful job, it’s also a wonderful source of meaning and inspiration. If you end up accepting the invitation, I’m certain you’re going to be a thoughtful, fair-minded, and inspiring academic leader. I’m excited to hear more about your experiences when we next see each other, and I look forward to helping you celebrate the completion of your term in a few short years.

Again, my heartiest congratulations.