



Faculty Forum

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On Being a Department Head, or, Have You Lost Your Mind?

Being a department head (DH) is an exhausting job. The DH is the faculty member closest to administration and the administrator closest to faculty and students. The boundary between any two systems is often the place of most turbulence, and the DH is, in effect, the boundary between faculty and administration. I have tried to write this piece from scratch several times, and each time, when I read it, I realize that the slant of that version (and this one also) is closely connected to the most current highpoint or low point of the job. But as the deadline for press draws closer, I have decided to cease fighting the turbulence of the boundary and go with today's flow.

One version that I tried to write was a listing of the good points and bad points about being a DH. The bad points list was very long, and the good points list was very short. Then I realized that the good things were broad, almost conceptual points, such as leading a program through substantial change or finding good faculty and helping them stay on track to tenure. The bad things were day-to-day annoyances or duties such as attending the fifth meeting of the week by Tuesday afternoon or going to pick up keys to the new offices because only the DH can sign for them. What didn't make the first version were things like the day-to-day pleasures of saying yes to a request for travel funds or learning that another paper by a department member had been accepted; these omissions were probably a reflection of my state of mind at the particular time. Another version of this essay was a week in the life of a DH. That got trashed when I realized that with all the meetings that particular week no one would read past the second paragraph, and no one would ever want to be a DH. So, to summarize all those versions, let me say that DHs get to do some good, big things and lots of little, pesky things.

Other versions of this essay had similar problems, but each contributed to what I see as the job of a DH and the qualities that a good DH must possess. I think that a strong DH must have some idea of where a department is going and how to get there. A DH must be willing to speak up about what a department is already doing and what it plans to do. The responsibility of overseeing the budget so that funds are distributed equitably and used for things that will move the department forward is critical. Also critical is the DH's ability to represent the department. While turf battles are generally harmful to everyone, it is important for a DH to work to secure the resources needed by the department while recognizing the needs of others so that everyone can function. Balancing the needs of the

department with the needs of the college or university as a whole is sometimes a delicate job.

My greatest pleasures in the job of DH are watching the program grow, helping faculty to expand their expertise, observing the development of new faculty into exciting teachers, creative researchers, and strong university citizens, and knowing that I'm doing my part to make those things happen. I am usually not the most important part of these processes, but I can see tangible results of work that I have done.

The worst part of my job is the feeling of isolation. I send lots of reports up the line, and I often never hear about them again. I attend many meetings, and I'm not always sure what was accomplished. I have lots of support from my departmental colleagues who always step up when a job needs to be done, but there are some jobs that only the department head can do, and at times those jobs can be time consuming and emotionally exhausting. A colleague, mentor, and former DH told me that when I took the job of DH I gave up the right to be "just plain folks." What once would have been a joke between colleagues now may carry a different connotation. I also feel separated from my life as a teacher and scholar. I teach fewer classes, and my students often hesitate to "bother" me in my office because they know that I'm always busy. My time for scholarly work is essentially nonexistent, and so I feel separated from my academic community.

What would help make this job more manageable? I'm not sure. Several ideas have been proposed including increasing release time and moving to a 12 month contract. While both of these ideas have merit, they would each increase my sense of isolation from my teaching and scholarly work. What I think would be the most help is clear lines of communication both in making requests and in responses to those requests. Why are we being asked to do something? How will the information be used? Who is the audience for the report? What were the results of the report that I filed? I would also like to see a clear chain of command that had all requests to DHs coming through the Dean. At times it seems that everyone asks for information directly from DHs and skips the Dean's office, so there is no coordination of requests. I would like to be seen as a partner in making decisions and setting agendas for the university and not just as the person responsible for implementing someone else's plans.

I am in awe of people who manage to do this job for many years and continue to be effective. I empathize with new department heads who always have at least one major task to complete within the first few weeks, maybe the first few days. I encourage those with a desire to serve to be open to the opportunity to be a DH. Living in the turbulence zone is exhausting, but the job of DH is the critical link between the faculty and students (who recreate the university every day in the classrooms, labs, and studios) and the administrators who make that creation possible. The DH is a complex job with unclear boundaries. What is your view of the DH role and what the boundaries should be? We await your responses.

Kathy Ivey, Chair of Math and Computer Science

Faculty Center for Excellence in Teaching & Learning

Responses to "On Being a Department Head, or, Have You Lost Your Mind?" by Kathy Ivey, 11/1/04

I have had more department heads than I can remember, some good, some not so good. The good ones were clear, fair, efficient, organized, competent and unpretentious. They were effective in teaching, scholarship and service. They generally took on the unappealing job of being department head from a sense of obligation to the department, not as a stepping stone to a higher-status administrative job. They saw themselves as advocates for the department, not as sycophants to the administration. Their good qualities made their job easier, because the faculty and staff pitched in and helped out. They were uniters, not dividers. And they were funny.

Mary Jean Ronan Herzog, Educational Leadership and Foundations

Kathy has discovered the true function of mid-level administrators: attend meetings and write reports. She has also discovered the true function of high-level administrators: call meetings and request reports. She has astutely identified the frustrations inherent in these functions: that the meetings are frequently excessive, boring, and non-productive; and that the reports are often duplicative, unexplained, and due two days ago. Whenever I read or hear about effective leadership and management, I wonder why academe still provides a model for the old, tired, and inefficient strategies. I sincerely hope that our new Provost will blow fresh air into the whole process here at WCU.

Sharon Jacques, Nursing

First, I thank Kathy for her good article. From my perspective, the department head (DH) position is the sometimes unrecognized key to professional faculty development. For the continuous improvement of teaching and learning, DHs can be the most influential, effective academic leaders on campus. DHs can be the agents of not only change in an academic culture but of its transformation.

Most DHs, like most faculty and administrators, would say they are "too busy" for taking on anything new or extraneous, and some might even say they are sometimes too overloaded to give as much time as they want to some significant aspects of their work. My concern is if DHs experience themselves to be too busy to be the kind of academic leaders for teaching and learning that they would like to be and that their role gives them the opportunity to be, they would seem to be caught in a recurring, exhausting loop. Not unlike the way many of us become teachers, DHs often have no or very little specific preparation for the position and, campus-wide, very limited systematic, collegial professional development exists for DHs.

I would like to suggest that the timing is good for a reconceptualization of the nature, role and meaning of the DH. What are the most important roles, responsibilities, and goals of a DH? Is there a need for a systematic, ongoing professional development for DHs as DHs? If the response is yes, how could DHs best be supported based upon what DHs themselves most want and need? How can an attention to the professional development of DHs (and the time it requires) become an integral

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aspect of the position? How can faculty who might want to become DHs be prepared for the position? How do faculty understand the role of their departmental heads, what do they need from their DHs, and what changes can the faculty suggest? Can a re-imagination of the DH role be discussed by DHs, faculty, and administration leaders?

Here are some specific possibilities for bringing the role of the DH more to light:

- Next academic year we could form a cohort-based Faculty Learning Community for DHs
- The DHs Support Group could be revived
- DHs could cooperate with the CFC in developing department-specific approaches for faculty development in teaching, learning and research for the departments
- DHs could have their own listserv or WebCT resource & discussion site
- a DH book group could form to read and discuss books about departmental leadership
- There could be an annual DHs' retreat prior to each academic year
- Perhaps a Task Force on DH Leadership & Development might help DHs deal with what they consider the most important issues for emergent academic leaders when the DHs feel too busy with endless waves of administrative details

I hope Kathy's essay will spark a serious discussion about the the full potentials of the position of DH at Western.

Alan Altany, Professor of Philosophy & Director of the Coulter Faculty Center for Excellence in Teaching & Learning