

Cultivating Departmental Leadership

I write this column at the conclusion the third AAG Healthy Departments Workshop. These workshops have brought together department chairs and future leaders with geographers engaged in university administration to discuss successful strategies for strengthening geography's position in higher education.

What I have learned from these workshops as well as from my own administrative experience is that (i) the department chair's job is enormously critical to the health of our discipline, and (ii) many, if not most faculty regard the chair's position as a thankless one that is to be avoided. My message in this column is simple: changing how we view positions of departmental leadership and how we mentor emerging leaders is of vital importance to the future of geography.

Why is the geography department chair's position so critical to our discipline? Effective department chairs are able to create an environment in which faculty, students, and staff reach their potential, thereby enabling the very best geographic scholarship and instructional pedagogy to flourish. Chairs are in a position to promote the work of their faculty and students to the higher administration thereby bringing visibility and, often, new resources to the program. Through their ability to make recommendations and referrals, geography chairs can encourage important interdisciplinary collaborations on and beyond the campus, once again underscoring the breadth and importance of geography to those working in other disciplines or in policy arenas.

Given the importance of this position, it would be comforting to think that there is a "leadership pipeline" to identify and mentor future departmental chairs. Instead, we are socialized to regard the chair's job as one of "sacrifice" compelling an individual to give up rewarding activities in exchange for less stimulating bureaucratic work. In our most cynical moments we may even cast the position as the resting place for a faculty

member who wishes to avoid research and/or teaching, or as a roost for a person only interested in power and authority. Not surprisingly, the message transmitted to junior faculty is that the chair's position is not one to which anyone should aspire.

There is no doubt that chairing a department involves a major restructuring of one's activities. Anyone who has been a chair will attest to the hours spent in preparing reports, budgets, evaluations, and dossiers, and the toll it exacts on time for research and instruction. A chair's work time is much less flexible than that of a typical faculty member and the frequency of interruptions and surprises are much greater. Relationships with colleagues change dramatically and there are always prickly personnel issues to resolve. Yes, the challenges can be daunting and the skills required are many.

Yet, over and over again, in surveys and opinion pieces¹ department chairs speak about the numerous intangible rewards of the job. There is the deep satisfaction that is gained from empowering faculty and students and enabling their successes. The chair's position is entrepreneurial and there are ample opportunities to think creatively to obtain resources, solve problems, and reach goals. The position allows one to see the university from a very different perspective and to develop new relationships with people across campus. Altogether, it is an extraordinary opportunity for professional and personal growth.

Like any other job, the position of a chair is not for everyone, and many faculty make their best contributions through research and teaching or recognize that they do not have the personality or skills needed for the job. However, it is those who demonstrate characteristics of good leadership at an early stage that we need to recognize and encourage. You know who they are. They are colleagues that do not shirk departmental responsibilities and are

effective in "delivering the goods." They are excellent listeners and provide thoughtful comments at faculty meetings. When making key departmental decisions, these colleagues are more concerned about the "big picture" than the impact on just their particular disciplinary subfield. These faculty are strong role models in terms of their engagement in the department's mission of teaching and research, and have a clear vision for the department.

Building and cultivating this leadership can be surprisingly simple yet enormously fulfilling. Take time to compliment the rising leaders for their effective work on committees and their insightful comments at faculty meetings. Point out to them that they have the makings of an effective department chair.

At appropriate points in their career recommend that they be nominated to attend leadership workshops. Most institutions offer these as do professional organizations such as the American Council for Education (www.acenet.edu) and the Council of Colleges of Arts and Sciences (www.ccas.net). Most importantly, communicate to them that the position of department chair is one that, although challenging, is a valued one that carries its own rewards.

Geography's position in our universities has steadily strengthened in recent years. Much of the credit goes to the efforts department chairs such as those I have met through the Healthy Departments workshops. Let's ensure that we cultivate a new generation of leaders that will continue and accelerate this trend. As geographers, we all stand to benefit. ■

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¹ These can be found in various issues of *The Department Chair*, published quarterly by Anker and the resources for department chairs published by the American Council for Education at www.acenet.edu.