

## *Chronicle of Higher Education*

# **For Chairs, the Seat's Gotten Hotter**

**By Audrey Williams June**

When Domenick J. Pinto first became a department chair, more than 25 years ago, it was a different job than it is today.

Mr. Pinto, who still heads the department of computer science and information technology at Sacred Heart University, created the schedule of classes, advised students, hired adjuncts, evaluated faculty members, and reviewed the curriculum.

"It was a very academic post back then," he says. "We were thought of as faculty members with managerial responsibilities."

Now Mr. Pinto and department chairs everywhere have become more like managers who happen to work in academe. He and his peers were once uninvolved in budgetary matters, but now they often swim in spreadsheets. They have become fiscal overseers and fund raisers, student recruiters and public-relations gurus.

In a middle-management job that has become increasingly complex, department chairs must cut costs in a time of shrinking resources, write grant applications and meet with potential donors to increase department resources, manage growing pools of adjunct labor, and respond to new calls for assessment.

Their roles are important because they are increasingly critical to a department's success and its professors' morale. A strong department chair can expand the unit's stature and improve its performance by recruiting top faculty members, attracting more students to its majors, creating a climate in which professors can excel at their jobs, and revising curriculum to keep up with new scholarship. But if a chair doesn't woo enough donors, faculty members may not be able to travel to as many conferences as they would like, or do as much research. If a department's leader fails to promote the group's work and convey its importance, deans and provosts might overlook the department when deciding where to allocate limited dollars. And if a chair is ineffective at mediating conflicts between colleagues, the simmering tensions can disrupt day-to-day work and undermine collaboration.

Yet, even though the job is becoming more pivotal, it remains a role for which few faculty members are properly trained. "I was just handed this job," says Mr. Pinto of his transition from professor to administrator. "Most people are."

And that's when it becomes most evident that the skills most professors have honed to become strong teachers and researchers aren't the ones they'll flex as they run a department, says Jeffrey Buller, dean of the honors college at Florida Atlantic University. In short, what attracted faculty members to academic life in the first place—the autonomy, the camaraderie of colleagues, opportunities to teach and do exciting research—isn't the stuff that department-chair appointments are made of.

"Chairs are put in this difficult position where they are held accountable for documenting that their programs are succeeding, that their faculty are succeeding, and that they're staying in budget," says Mr. Buller, author of several books on academic administration. "We're seeing a professionalization of higher-education administration—and that's not such a bad thing. Because the faculty position itself has changed and because we have an accountability culture in higher education, you need people who have managerial training to serve as chair."

It's in the best interests of universities, he says, to provide the training faculty need to lead their departments or run the risk of half-hearted and ineffective leadership.

"A lot of people, they're just glad to be done with it," says R. Kent Crookston, a former department chair who is now associate director of Brigham Young University's Faculty Center and has done research on department chairs. "And people who haven't done the job are thinking, Well, I could do it, but should I?"

Joan Piroch, a professor of psychology at Coastal Carolina University, wasn't sure she could be a good chair, but at a colleague's request she gave it a try. She took on the role in 1987 and ended up serving as chair of the psychology-and-sociology department for 22 years. When she stepped down, in 2009, the job had a different pace and feel than it did in the beginning, she says.

Recruiting students no longer fell solely to admissions officers at her university but had become a task shared by department chairs. Scheduling classes became more of a time burden as the number of students served by the department grew, along with the number of faculty members, when psychology and sociology were combined.

And there was the paperwork, which is now attached to nearly every task, as chairs sign off on an increasing number of faculty and student activities and generate any number of reports in response to requests from administrators.

"In the early days of my tenure as chair, you could make a phone call and things would happen. Or you could send an email to a person and get something resolved," Ms. Piroch says. "Now you can't even get chairs in a classroom without paperwork."

Growing emphasis on assessment is one reason paperwork is increasing. Department chairs are typically responsible for overseeing the process of documenting what students are learning.

When the calls for assessment began, Ms. Piroch called department meetings to discuss the best way to measure and track learning. Professors would collect data, a group of faculty would analyze them, and then she would write a report about the findings.

But over time, she says, "the rules for assessment kept changing." Administrators cycled through with different ideas about what to measure and how, and her colleagues eventually distanced themselves from the process.

Ms. Piroch says she would spend a couple of weeks at the end of every academic year on assessment efforts, sometimes coming into the office before dawn to fine-tune various parts of her report. "But I was never really satisfied with the assessment plans that came out of our department."

Near the end of her stint as chair, Ms. Piroch was also unhappy with how little time she was able to spend with new faculty members, a key group in the growing department. When Ms. Piroch became chair, there were six professors in the psychology department and 100 majors, she says. By the time she stepped down, there were 16 faculty members and about 600 majors in the combined department.

At first, Ms. Piroch said, she would work closely with new faculty members, meeting with them to talk about expectations and observing how they taught their classes. That changed during the second half of her tenure as chair. "The kinds of things that I had to do as chair on a daily basis kept me from doing what I thought was important," she says.

Despite the frustrations, she says she enjoyed her manager role over all. "I really, -really liked working with the faculty," she says. She does have more free time now. She can go to the gym in the morning and leave campus during daylight hours. She has also rediscovered her love of teaching.

Ms. Piroch taught a senior research course while serving as chair, but she says she felt bad that her duties as chair prevented her from devoting as much time to her students as she wanted.

Now students get more of her attention, and she is teaching courses, like one on sensation and perception, that she hadn't taught in a long time. "I've forgotten how much fun it was."

Department chairs land in their roles in various ways. At some institutions, everyone in the department takes a turn as chair. At others, the chair is appointed by the dean or elected by colleagues. Sometimes academics are hired from the outside.

Carol Anne Costabile-Heming, for example, moved to the University of North Texas last year to head its department of world languages, literatures, and cultures. She had already served as a department chair at Northern Kentucky University.

Running a department as an "outsider," even with previous administrative experience, is different from serving as chair at a place where you have long worked as a faculty member.

"When you come in from the outside, you have no friends, but you also have no enemies," says Ms. Costabile-Heming, who manages 33 full-time faculty members and 27 adjuncts. "The biggest part of the job early on is information gathering. You have to learn the institutional context."

She suggests that faculty members serve as chairs only after they have become full professors. Otherwise, she says, the workload associated with the job forces faculty members to put their scholarship on hold—a move that is likely to keep a promotion to full professor out of reach.

"I've seen people whose careers basically get put on hold for the time they're serving as chair, and it's hard to catch up," says Ms. Costabile-Heming, who went to North Texas as a full professor.

She has developed tactics for easing the crush of duties that regularly befall department chairs. For example, she goes out of her way to keep at least one day—Tuesdays—free of meetings. Ms. Costabile-Heming mostly uses that time to analyze data, write reports, or plan for the following week, she says. But she might also use the uninterrupted time to focus on her writing and editing. "Your time is no longer your own. I have other people who control my calendar," she says. "You can get up in the morning and think, I have two hours to do this or that, and by the time you drive in in the morning, those two hours are gone."

Siva Vaidhyanathan knew that serving as department chair meant devoting big chunks of time to others' pursuits. He had wanted to wait to take on the job until later in his career. But in a department of a half-dozen professors, he had little choice.

"I knew it was my turn," says Mr. Vaidhyanathan, 47, a full professor who is near the end of a three-year term as chair of the media-studies department at the University of Virginia.

He discovered some of the downsides almost immediately. The hours he once spent reading copious amounts of literature in his field and writing books are now spent in meetings, fund raising, and promoting the department to people within the university and outside of it.

Mr. Vaidhyanathan also had to give up teaching seminars to small groups of students—one of his favorite activities—and, instead, teach a single required survey course of about 250 students that no one else could pick up.

"Being chair has not only made me teach less, it's made me a worse teacher," he says. "I'm just not working those muscles enough."

His disengagement from his identity as a professor has been particularly acute because of the digital work he does, says Mr. Vaidhyanathan, whose third book, *The Googlization of Everything (And Why We Should Worry)*, was published just before he became chair. He estimates that he's about a year behind in the reading he normally does to keep up with his ever-changing field.

"I can't wait for this summer, when I'm done being chair," says Mr. Vaidhyanathan. "I'm going to spend the first month reading trying to catch up on all these important books that I haven't had a chance to read."

But until then, Mr. Vaidhyanathan has plenty to do, including meeting with potential donors. In a state that has sharply curtailed the amount of money it appropriates to higher education, Mr. Vaidhyanathan estimates that he spends as much as one-tenth of his time on alumni relations and fund raising.

One day in October, for example, he was planning to take some potential donors out to dinner, lengthening his work day until about 9:30 p.m. and squeezing out the chance to spend time with his young daughter.

"I will occasionally go to dinner with a millionaire who is a major figure in the media industry and has some connection with UVa," he says. "Anyone who has ever worked in development knows these relationships take a tremendous amount of time to build. It can be very frustrating to have committed so much time and seeing no money come in in the short term. But that just drives me to work harder at it."

Yet every hour he spends talking to potential donors is, he says, "an hour I'm not spending with the students or not reading a dissertation or not reading a book in my field." Mr. Vaidhyanathan says he also spends a "substantial amount of time" doing public relations to keep the media-studies department in the spotlight. It's one of the smallest departments at Virginia, which means other departments can easily overshadow it and gain a larger share of limited resources from the university.

There's only one way to keep that from happening, Mr. Vaidhyanathan says: "I'm always bugging the deans and the provost about my colleagues' accomplishments. This is a job of constant marketing and sales to the dean, to the donors, to the media."

It's also a job that many department chairs learn simply by doing. It became clear to Mr. Vaidhyanathan early on that his first year as department chair wouldn't be an easy one.

"Nothing in any of my previous training prepared me for half of the work that I do as department chair," he says.

Even now, with a steep learning curve behind him, he still worries about making a wrong move. Department chairs, after all, play a big role in whether faculty members are happy—and therefore productive—on the job.

"I do have the ability to really mess up somebody's life if I mess up," Mr. Vaidhyanathan says. "If I botch a tenure-and-promotion case, someone's life is ruined."

He believes, though, that he has managed to move the department forward. He has hired three assistant professors to add to the six who were there when he took over the department, and he has more than doubled the number of majors, to 100.

He managed to secure "just enough" money from donors, he says, to allow his colleagues to be able to go to conferences. He also revised the department's curriculum to include more digital-media courses and has mined his contacts in the media profession to get students internships and jobs.

Even when chairs have a vision for their department, they still have to find the time to carry it out. To get things done, department chairs should set priorities and take a break from technology each day, says Christian K. Hansen, who was mathematics department chair for eight years at Eastern Washington University and wrote a book called *Time Management for Department Chairs*.

"There are always going to be more things demanding your time than you can do," says Mr. Hansen, who is now associate dean of computing and engineering sciences. "If you try to do everything that comes to your desk, it's going to eventually burn you out and you'll get frustrated."

Another challenge for modern department chairs, he says, is that they tend to have fewer and fewer people to help them get things done.

"It's becoming harder to delegate because there are fewer people to delegate to," Mr. Hansen says. "With the budget crises that most universities have faced, there are fewer staff positions available, fewer people that are available for support functions, fewer tenured and tenure-track positions, and a larger proportion of faculty who are just there to teach and are not expected to do any service work."

Managing time is especially important, and challenging, for people who lead large departments.

With two years as English-department chair under her belt, Jackie E. Stallcup still struggles to get everything done during jampacked days at California State University at Northridge. Her department has about 600 undergraduate students majoring in English and 150 graduate students. There are 33 tenured and tenure-track professors and, on average, about 65 lecturers and 30 teaching assistants. Among them, they teach about 300 classes every semester.

For a department that size, a task like putting together the schedule—a painstaking process of matching faculty members and teaching assistants with the classes that need to be taught in a semester—can be a grueling activity.

Ms. Stallcup says she completes it in three phases, each of which take two to three days of "concentrated work." Between each phase she trades emails for at least a week with faculty members who want different class assignments or to correct mistakes.

"It's like a big puzzle," says Ms. Stallcup, who was working on the schedule for the spring 2014 semester in October. "It's fun, but it takes a lot of time."

Ms. Stallcup, however, is luckier than many in her position. She can turn to two associate chairs for some relief. One handles things like course substitutions, students' problems and complaints, and the department's bimonthly newsletter. The other coordinates the department's assessment activities and certain types of undergraduate-advisement duties. The department has long had an associate-chair position but added the second one this academic year to provide more help to the chair and to give an additional faculty member experience in a leadership role.

Like most professors in the chair's job, Ms. Stallcup has a reduced teaching load. Instead of four classes a semester, she teaches just one, in children's literature. To make it work, she chose a time slot in the evening, which she says makes it easier for her to make the transition from administrator to professor.

"I close my door at 5 p.m., and my time as department chair is over at that moment," Ms. Stallcup says. "Then I can say, now it's time for me to teach. I love teaching, and I couldn't stand not doing it."

Navigating the role of department chair is something many people learn mostly by doing. And there's a lot they wish they knew how to do better, according to Mr. Crookston, of Brigham Young.

How to deal with problem professors was the top item cited in a survey Mr. Crookston conducted of nearly 3,000 department chairs. Not far behind was "guide department change" and "effectively manage time." Some department chairs, though, are able to get good guidance from within their university or elsewhere.

Some higher-education associations, such as the Council of Independent Colleges and the American Council on Education, hold meetings to help department chairs learn the job. So do some scholarly associations.

Some universities are developing in-house training programs for chairs. An academic-chairpersons' conference conducted by Kansas State University draws a few hundred people each year. Meanwhile, some people learn by developing a relationship with someone at their college who can serve as a mentor.

Ms. Stallcup was groomed for her position by the previous chair of her department, who encouraged her to serve in her first administrative position as graduate adviser and then mentored her during her stint as associate chair.

Ms. Piroch credits attending a department-chair conference held by the Association of Heads of Departments of Psychology with giving her the opportunity to network and learn from people who knew exactly what her job was like.

Despite the changes and challenges, some academics say they feel cut out for the job. Mr. Pinto spoke at the Kansas State chairpersons' conference in February and gave a glimpse into his nearly three-decade career as chair. "I really do love the job. Every day is different," says Mr. Pinto, who still chooses to teach three or four courses a semester. "I try to keep teaching a major part of my job. I have a true love of teaching, and it is what I feel keeps me balanced as well as current in the field."

He also gave some advice at the conference. Constantly cultivate support from faculty members and administrators, he told attendees, and take time management seriously. In a nod to the job's all-encompassing nature, he told fellow chairs that they should adopt realistic expectations: Never assume, he said, that you will get to your office and have time to do anything other than solve problems.

## **The Duties of a Modern Department Chair**

### **Task: Signing paperwork**

Jean Opsomer became chair of the statistics department at Colorado State University in the 2011-12 academic year. He quickly found out that one of the most common activities for chairs is to move paperwork along with a signature. Among the documents (some of which are online) Mr. Opsomer is responsible for: offers of admission, approvals of grade changes, approvals of department purchases, diplomas and certificates for distance-education students, and changes of committee memberships. "I sign something every day," says Mr. Opsomer. He estimates that he might sign off on several dozen documents a week—not what he would call a major burden. "Sometimes it's a form left on my desk, and sometimes it's a form online, but I do a lot of signing. It has to get done."



**Task: Meeting with parents**

Joan Piroch officially stepped into the role of department chair in 1987 and served in the role for 22 years. Ms. Piroch, a professor of psychology, noticed that over time, an increasing number of students and parents were stopping by her office. What did they want? To vent about the perceived shortcomings of a professor in the department. "Early on, students didn't do that; they worked things out with the professor," she says. "But later, anytime a student was dissatisfied with a faculty member or didn't like their grade, they came to see me. And they were not always nice about it." One mother, Ms. Piroch says, came to defend her son, who had been accused of plagiarism. "So many parents now feel like we paid our money, our kid should get a degree."

**Task: Coordinating assessment**

As accreditation boards, lawmakers, and parents put increasing pressure on universities to demonstrate what students learn, the universities in turn look to department chairs to coordinate the collection of data and complete the related paperwork. But most chairs haven't been trained to do what needs to be done, says Siva Vaidhyanathan, chair of the department of media studies at the University of Virginia. "Accreditation boards have been driving us to basically make up instruments to measure something or pretend to measure something and then document in a way that satisfies their bureaucratic hunger," he says. "Most of what we do in that area is just trying to put the pegs in a hole. It's tremendously time-consuming."

**Task: Fund raising**

Department chairs are increasingly asked to take on financial duties, especially at public universities, which have seen their state appropriations shrink. At the University of Virginia, Mr. Vaidhyanathan says he spend 5 to 10 percent of his time meeting with or reaching out to alumni and other potential donors to set the stage for donations to roll in down the road. In October, for example, he had dinner with a potential donor and got in touch via email to set up a meeting with a person who works in the media in the Washington area and is married to someone who graduated from Virginia. "I have no idea if this person has any willingness or ability to contribute, but I'm going to see if I can have lunch with them sometime down the line to at least spread good will," Mr. Vaidhyanathan says.

**Task: Managing adjuncts**

For Jackie E. Stallcup, chair of the department of English at California State University at Northridge, putting together the class schedule includes assigning slots to about 65 adjuncts, on average, each semester. Once she completes the assignments for full-timers, she begins figuring out what classes will be covered by lecturers. She is guided by a union contract that specifies which lecturers must be offered work first. "That takes a couple of days apiece," Ms. Stallcup says. After she tweaks the schedule per faculty members' requests, she works at least another two days to assign remaining classes to the lecturers who are next in line. "I've created an Excel spreadsheet for the part-time schedule as well, which allows me to keep track on a running basis how much of my part-time budget I have spent, given the part-time faculty that I have hired."