A Dialogue On the Departmental Ship: How Possibly to Steer

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ANYONE who has had the privilege of chairing a department—no matter how large or small—has had to confront directly the fact that there is no training for such a position, no short course in departmental management, no "positive thinking" guidebook. In some very real sense, the term departmental chair is a misnomer. The etymology of the term's use is European: the "chair" was the individual who sat at the head of the conference table, gaveled meetings to order, and oversaw the parliamentary procedure by which business was conducted and decisions made. This history, however, bears scant resemblance to the responsibilities of a departmental chair in an American university or college in the last decade of the twentieth century. Somehow, this individual—who, one hopes, serves at the pleasure of both his or her colleagues and the dean—must fill the roles of sage, prophet, manager (in the current business school sense of one who juggles tasks splendidly), resident marriage counselor, authority on childrearing and personal finance, legal guru, psychiatrist, curricular specialist, diplomat (how many times can one be yelled at without yelling back in return?), chancellor of the exchequer, foreign exchange manipulator, fund-raiser, protector and eloquent defender of the faith to constituencies both internal and external, and so on. A far cry indeed from calling a motion to the floor or amending a mistake in the minutes.

What follows is a fantasy of mine. When I was first requested to serve as chair of my department, I asked a wizened senior colleague how I was supposed to learn to be a good chair. He laughed raucously, then turned serious for a moment and replied, "As you are doing the job." I had hoped at the time for some words of sage counsel, some cautionary advice about how to proceed. This fantasy is thus born from almost a decade spent as department chair and from those moments of disquiet I experienced as a new chair when contemplating the task before me.

RETIRING CHAIR: We are all delighted that you have agreed to serve as chair of the department. The job is as complex as any you will ever be asked to assume. I am relieved to think about my upcoming research leave and my return to library study and a full complement of classes. Being the chair for all these years has certainly kept me from teaching any new classes, and my editor continues to press for my next chapters. The dean was wise to choose you, but she was wiser still to have consulted with each member of the department, including our nontenured colleagues. Academics are a prickly lot, and no one appreciates having a dean choose departmental leadership cavalierly.

CHAIR-ELECT: Could the dean have appointed me without seeking the advice of the faculty?

RC: Probably, since chairs do serve at the pleasure of the dean, but such would be folly. Our bylaws stipulate clearly that the chair serves for a three-year, possibly renewable term and provide for a formal dialogue between the dean and faculty members over the choice of a replacement when the position is to become vacant. No one should ever wish to serve as chair without the support of the faculty, and no dean should ever be so callous as to disregard the faculty's views on departmental leadership.

CE: Why do we have to have these bylaws in such a relatively small department?

RC: Any department, large or small, needs to have a few procedural matters formally written down and agreed to. If a set of bylaws exists, then any dean will have no choice but to respect the department's procedures in protecting its interests. No department needs a procedures manual the size of the postal service's, but a page or two of essential procedures to be followed is critical.

CE: Some departments grow to enormous size through administrative fiat, but this type of explosive growth seems fraught with difficulty. Think of University Y, where the department suddenly became one of the administration's highest priorities. An eminent scholar was brought in to be chair. He brought with him an entourage of professors and graduate students and a ready-made, established reputation. Yet now, everything seems to have collapsed, people are looking to leave at the first chance, and no one could possibly be happy about the outcome of the experiment.

RC: Massive and abrupt changes rarely take us as far as we hope. Transplants may well be successful in...
I can only conclude that the best way to build a department is by working steadily at the ethos within the institution to another. But my own experience leads me to believe that the most solid of departments are those built internally. There are no panaceas or quick fixes. I can only conclude that the best way to build a department is by working steadily at the ethos within the department.

CE: This all sounds hopelessly utopian and idealistic to me. Are you sure you haven’t read some pious article in an education journal that causes you to spout such platitudes?

RC: Not at all. Where does a faculty member’s loyalty really lie? With the theoretical abstract of his or her discipline or with his or her colleagues? Consider the situation merely on the basis of time spent. How many hours a week do we spend at the university? How many hours a week do we spend at scholarly meetings of our discipline off campus? Where are most of our efforts expended? At our own university, of course. Have you ever noticed that academics rarely use the phrase “going to work,” which is so common in our society? When “going to the university” implies a genuine ethos of shared opportunities and shared goals, “going to work” seems not in the least representative of what we do.

CE: All this sounds too theoretical. How do you build a positive ethos within a department?

RC: First, by treating everyone with equal respect. It is a serious mistake to have one set of teaching loads for tenured members and a heavier set for those in the tenure tracks. Think of how illogical it is to demand that junior staff members teach heavier loads than their senior colleagues do when the junior members have to work steadfastly on their research projects in order to be considered for tenure. Besides, asking everyone to teach the same load demonstrates a commitment to equity.

CE: Other than ensuring fair teaching loads, what can be done to build the sort of ethos you consider essential?

RC: One word, which you should write one hundred times, like we all had to do in grade school, in order to commit it to memory: support. Faculty members must have the material support necessary to function as professionals. Given the relatively low salaries of academics everywhere—and certainly of humanists like ourselves—support for travel to scholarly meetings is imperative. Now I do not mean that we should underwrite lavish dinners on the department’s always straitened accounts, but we must pay for airline tickets when our colleagues have been invited to deliver papers or to chair sessions off campus. Sometimes the registration fees are unnecessarily high (and every chair should write stiff letters of complaint—even to the MLA—when they are). But we should do everything within our power to provide these opportunities to our colleagues. They benefit from scholarly interaction with their peers, the department benefits by having its name associated with the research efforts of its faculty members, and the university benefits by playing a vital role in the dissemination of knowledge. And the university must provide the department with the same measure of support if the ethos within the department is to approach what it should be.

CE: Over the years I have witnessed the remarkable effect of technology on our discipline. It is clear to me that as part of our commitment to our colleagues, we must press for word processors, electronic-mail access, voice mail, and all the other advantages of modern electronics. These technologies are not gimmicks or toys. They help us do our job, and the humanities departments must always present their needs to the administration with the same urgency that our colleagues in the natural sciences demonstrate.

RC: You already represent your constituency well. There is another equally important factor involved in building a departmental ethos. It is always easy to cast blame for failures. Any number of scapegoats and excuses come to mind: the administration, which always seeks to cut and constrict, the lack of financial resources, previous chairs, foolish tenure appointments that shackle a department’s future, lack of collegiality, prima donnas, and so on. Taking aim elsewhere does not accomplish the goal of assuming responsibility for ourselves. We cannot change the past, so why must we waste valuable time and effort lamenting mistakes of times gone? What we can face squarely is our own common future.

CE: So you believe that building from the lower ranks, rather than importing a “star” as others have done, is part of facing our common future together?

RC: Absolutely. People who take a job only as a watering stop before the next tend not to have institutional loyalty, whereas faculty members who feel that their contributions are valued and appreciated, that their concerns are addressed, and, above all, that they are heard and respected know intuitively that they are the institution. Remember wise old President Eliot at Harvard, who supposedly said that students come in and out of a university’s doors and administrators come and go but “the faculty is forever.”

CE: So if we want to build, we should build from positions of loyalty.

RC: Exactly. A department, like a university, is its faculty. Uphold the highest ideals in your own scholarly and teaching life, and others will do the same. Work hard, and others will follow your example. Be concerned about the atmosphere in your department. Do people like to “go to the university”? Is there some attractive, quiet place where faculty colleagues can gather to chat and have a cup of coffee or a glass of sherry? The English have always known how important such places are—the commons room of an Oxford college provides a space for collegial interchange so ubiquitously lacking in American academic buildings. If you have to, take a large office and convert it into some sort of departmental commons area:
the return on the investment will be noteworthy and will not be lost on your colleagues.

CE: Are there not intangibles just as important as common rooms, word processors, and travel accounts?

RC: Well, there is a critically important one, but it might be difficult to attain because it involves revealing our vulnerability. In the natural sciences, there has long been a tradition of sharing with one’s colleagues experimental data and drafts of manuscripts. In the humanities, however, we seem to be more timid in this regard. Sometimes the senior faculty members need to take the lead. When a senior member asks a junior colleague to read a draft of an essay or lecture and suggest ways to improve the piece, both of them learn a very important lesson: each of us is vulnerable.

CE: You are suggesting that no scholar outgrows the need for another’s sharpened blue pencil.

RC: Well, I certainly never have. The sharing of ideas within your department should be the norm and not the exception. This practice in turn will help to defeat the idea that scholars must toil away in isolation. If younger colleagues feel that they can turn to senior members of the department—draft in hand, intrinsic problems and questions here and there—without fear of being judged and with the expectation of collegial attention warmly paid, then the ethos in your department will be precisely what it should. But remember that a young, nontenured colleague will never take the first step for fear that the outcome of the future tenure vote will be decided by the admission, say, that the third section of an essay in draft refuses to sit comfortably between sections two and four. If collegial discourse were the norm in graduate training, then perhaps such fears would be anomalous among our colleagues in tenure-track positions.

CE: You bring up graduate training. What are the most serious problems within the ideal department regarding graduate students?

RC: Our simple failure to see that only the blink or two of an eye separates them from us. We waste too much time and effort by building constraints. Rather than produce countless clones of ourselves, we should produce a few stellar scholars who are also real teachers to replace us at our common task. Graduate education seems to focus on the production of scholars, and God knows that scholarship and creative research are the hallmarks of intellectual life. But we have a concomitant responsibility to train our graduate students to teach properly. Too many institutions rely on the time-honored practice of sending a young graduate student armed with a copy of the textbook off to do battle with the undergraduate populace, just so the senior faculty members do not have to sully their hands by teaching the great unwashed masses, whose tuition dollars keep the rest of the operation solvent.

CE: That means we need graduate pedagogy courses that are as highly regarded as the best graduate seminars in the department. The pedagogy courses must be taught by people dedicated to the cause of graduate training in its broadest and most professional sense, people who are willing to experiment with videotaping, films, team teaching, practicums, realia, and all the rest that too often gets dismissed as “so much education school baggage.”

RC: Yes, but I must smile when I read that American universities need to place more emphasis on teaching—the best departments have always known that we owe our graduate students both formal pedagogical training and enough varied, supervised classroom experiences that they will not be utterly bewildered, as most of us “veterans” were three decades ago, when they have to teach their first classes.

CE: What should a good chair do about the departmental curriculum? Language and literature departments can multiply their offerings in any number of directions: language, area studies, literature, literature in translation, civilization, linguistics, literary theory, business, and all the rest. What can we do well when we could do so much?

RC: There is a great danger highlighted by your question. A department can be spread so thinly across so many subfields that by trying to do everything, it ends up doing nothing well. I would attack the issue simply and essentially. Build your department squarely on superior language teaching. Involve the entire faculty, from neophyte assistant professor to senior full professor, in some kind of language teaching. The only way to keep the teaching of language from being considered the “bottom drawer” of a department is to consider it the cornerstone on which the entire departmental edifice stands. Departments which believe that language teaching is somehow “beneath” the professoriat do so at their peril.

CE: Students become accustomed to accepting whatever we offer them. Do you really believe they notice the faculty members’ commitment to language teaching?

RC: Students get the message, as they always do, and react accordingly. If the department considers the teaching of language a “service” to the university, whereas the teaching of literature or theory is of “real” intellectual merit, then the cornerstone of a truly excellent department has been lost, perhaps never to be recovered. We cannot allow ourselves to climb any further into our proverbial ivory towers. Students want from us relevance and immediacy. What can possibly be more relevant or more immediate than the ability to manipulate another language with certainty and skill? We need to pay far more attention to our teaching practices, particularly in view of the strides that have been made in technology.

CE: What role should study-abroad programs play in the overall departmental scheme?

RC: Study-abroad programs should never be solely relegated to the “international affairs” office staff, who largely process papers, see that payments are in on time, and forward students’ passport applications to the correct governmental addresses. Study-abroad programs should fit, always, into the department’s curricular structures.
When study-abroad opportunities are continuations of course offerings on campus, they are not disjointed islands but are instead integral parts of the curricular structure. Students will understand and participate in study-abroad programs when the curricula abroad follow directly on the curricula at home and, most important, when the department is fully engaged in planning, directing, and supervising the programs. Here again, we teach best by example. If we truly believe that such experiences are vital to our students' progress, and if the links between the department and the study-abroad programs are clear, then the students will participate.

CE: Do you really believe in the “build it and they will come” theory you seem to be espousing?

RC: As clichéd as it sounds, yes. Students always vote with their feet. They know when something is of value to them, and they react accordingly. Their futures are, after all, what is at stake. The education is theirs. We have had our turn.

CE: I think that I may call the dean back and tell her that I just cannot undertake a task as daunting as this. I am very concerned about the time commitment that being chair will require. How ever do you manage your time? Do you ever get any work of your own accomplished?

RC: To quote Thoreau, “Simplify, simplify.” I would add, “Delegate, delegate.” Remember that line of Winston Churchill's? When a London dowager asked him to explain the key to his monumental success as first lord of the Admiralty, he replied, “Madame, I have none. All I try to do is to keep up with those whom I appoint.” Give authority to people you can trust, back them in their decisions, let them function without your constant supervision, and always remember to have someone who can replace you at a moment's notice. Empire building and vision, and always remember to have someone who can trust you is common sense. I guess I would urge you never to lose your perspective on yourself. Our department existed before you arrived here as a young assistant professor, it has managed to survive my term as chair, and it will just as surely survive yours.

CE: You are suggesting that the best I can hope for is to leave the department stronger than I found it.

RC: Precisely. Not every day will be easy. Far from it. But chairing our department can be the most rewarding thing you will ever do. The frame for being of service is just right. You can have a profound impact if you choose simply never to accept the status quo. Once we accept the status quo, mediocrity sets in. Remember Walt Whitman's fervent counsel in "A Passage to India": "Sail forth, steer for the deep waters only." If Ralph Vaughan Williams could compose his monumental Sea Symphony around those lines, you should likewise choose to steer our departmental ship accordingly. And finally, have a good time. Never lose the ability to laugh: first at yourself, and then at everything else. You will make a fine chair. Your instincts are on target, and you have the necessary personal commitment. I have concluded that, in order to be a really good chair, one must be far more ambitious for one's department than for oneself. I will not intrude, but you should let me know if I can help in any way. Good luck.

The facetious parts of the above dialogue will, I hope, be forgiven as so much fantasy, the more serious perhaps taken as the fruit of one individual's long experience. Chairing a department can be, quite truthfully, one of the most invigorating endeavors an academic can ever be asked to undertake.

Leadership, we all understand, is everything.

Note

I would like to dedicate this essay with gratitude to the faculty of the Department of Romance Languages and Literatures at Washington University. My appreciation to my associate J. Randall Phillips for his unstinting efforts in improving this essay.