A Tale of Two Division Chairs

When you think of the job title "Division Chair," what comes to mind? Roles and responsibilities are ever-changing in higher education. The division or department chair position at community and technical colleges has morphed into a myriad of roles, including business manager, student concerns officer, recruiter, program developer, course builder and scheduler, institutional researcher, and grant writer, to name a few. Traditionally, the chair assumed the role of scheduling, mediating student concerns, or hosting faculty meetings. Yet, with increasing demands on institutions to become more accountable and as a result of the scope of their job duties, community and technical college division chairs have become modern-day senior academic leaders. Through a pseudo-epistolary mode, this article shares the experiences of myself and a colleague as former division chairs, which may echo the readers' sentiments. Ultimately, however, our goal through this article is to provide relevant best practices for persons aspiring to serve in this capacity.

Larry Johnson: Self-Reflection Fosters Successful Leadership

I had big dreams for my first 30 days as the chair of the largest department at our institution. In my mind, this would be somewhat easy since the persons I supervised were once my colleagues. Yet, it was surprising how different things became when those with whom I collaborated as a peer now reported to and were evaluated by me. As such, this was one of the most challenging moments of my professional career.

Therefore, the first thing that I did in my new role, and the first thing I would encourage any new chair to do, was to commit to a self-reflection exercise. I considered my posture with current colleagues, the work that was before me, and the college's strategic priorities. This self-reflection process prompted me to draft a 12-month strategic plan. Immediately, I considered ways that I could engage the faculty. Faculty buy-in may seem like a minor conversation; however, without the support of faculty, leading an academic department can prove to be an arduous task.

Thus, as I reflected on my time as a faculty member and on the relationships that I forged with my colleagues, I leveraged those bonds to form working committees. The first committee that I formed was a hospitality committee, which was comprised of full-time and part-time faculty. Involving these key stakeholders

proved critical to the implementation of new initiatives. With the newly formed committee, faculty began to establish celebratory events for their colleagues—events such as birthday celebrations and holiday luncheons. While this may seem of less importance to larger academic committees, the hospitality committee proved to be an excellent way to gain trust and demonstrate mutual respect and value for all team members.

Becoming division chair was not solely about leading faculty and advocating for student success. As I worked with my team, I noticed that I began to develop a servant-leader persona. While I completed the tasks required of me, I was always considerate of how my decisions would impact not only students, but my faculty members as well. When possible, I engaged faculty in one-on-one discussions regarding their goals. It was important to listen to my team members and support their professional development. Therefore, I determined to dismantle the notions, at least subconsciously, of a leader being dictator-like or autocratic, to a view of leading from the perspective of a servant. Subsequently, I encouraged and advocated for faculty to write proposals and attend national conferences. In so doing, faculty who had become slightly stagnant were re-energized and went on to develop co-curricular programs and participate in curriculum redesign efforts (e.g., developmental education or accelerated learning programs). Simply taking the time to support my team through professional development opportunities, either by attending a conference or allowing them to lead departmental workshops, instilled a sense of pride in them to rethink their respective teaching philosophies to meet the needs of our students. An expression that has resonated with me as I reflected on my own leadership experience is John C. Maxwell's profound quote: "Leaders must be close enough to relate to others, but far enough ahead to motivate them."

Susan Wright: Professional Development is Key to Motivation

My journey as department chair began in June 1, 2013. It was a memorable day for many reasons, not the least of which was the fact that it was commencement day for the college, as well as my initiation into a higher education leadership position. As a bright-eyed, process-oriented, and energetic accounting professor, I expected the new role to afford me the opportunity to employ skills with which I was already accustomed; however, that was not my reality. Instead, I plunged into the deep, murky waters of managing personnel,

strategic planning, evaluating discipline-level learning outcomes, and comprehending program accreditation. As department chairs (i.e., middle managers), we must balance the agendas of faculty, staff, administration, students, and internal and external stakeholders.

After 30 days on the job, I looked up and realized I was caught in the quandary—that of a mid-level manager who misinterpreted the roles and duties of a department chair. In my evaluation of the program and faculty, I observed a critical need for continuous professional development. Subsequently, I viewed my position as the glue that holds the organization together. In order to tread the waters, and ultimately to learn to swim, I looked to veteran counterparts and senior-executive leaders in higher education for guidance and mentorship.

So, what did I learn from the above experience? First, through transparency and open dialogue, I cultivated relationships amongst the faculty and staff. Additionally, I evaluated my direct reports and observed their areas of strengths and weaknesses, and then used these observations to support the development of projects and initiatives, thereby supporting the overall mission of the department and the college. Ultimately, this method provided me with the opportunity to learn about the passions that drove each faculty member. With this new perspective, I was able to successfully assign faculty to projects or initiatives that supported our completion and retention efforts. Lastly, by becoming a peer evaluator with the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges (SACS), I was able lead course and program-level assessment.

With these first-time experiences of former division chairs in mind, we must ask: How do we prepare future division chairs for such a critical role?

Tips for Success

As faculty consider future leadership opportunities, it is imperative that they thoroughly consider the division chair role and its complexities. To be a successful leader and change agent, one must be receptive to change, employ a shared governance model, be innovative, build relationships, and most importantly, be a great listener. Based upon our collective experiences and observations, we share the following tips to persons interested in higher education management positions:

- Become knowledgeable about college policies and procedures.
- Establish relationships with veteran counterparts.
- Understand the budgeting process.
- Comprehend trends in higher education.
- Develop time management skills.

The above list is generated as a result of our experiences. However, it offers fundamental principles that can also help cultivate and foster essential skills for other managers. It is important to note that leadership development is not an overnight process—rather it is a process of constant trials and errors that can be improved through continuous reflection and professional development.

Conclusion

As policymakers and regional accrediting bodies add more pressure on colleges to meet performance metrics, it is incumbent upon new leaders in higher education to have a thorough understanding of best practices for leading academic divisions. Thus, the role of the division chair must be revisited in community and technical colleges. To better meet the demands and changes occurring in higher education, evaluating the scope and responsibilities of this critical role must be initiated by senior-executive leaders. Colleges must invest in professional development and training for aspiring leaders. In most cases, the division chair role is the genesis for more advanced senior leadership roles.

The mark of a successful institution is one that successfully balances academic and student affairs agendas amid constant changes, as suggested by internal and external stakeholders. In summary, the institution is most effective when its division chairs are adequately trained and able to demonstrate an understanding and application of requisite skills required of mid-level managers.

Larry Johnson, *Campus Provost*

For further information, contact the author at St. Louis Community College - Forest Park, 5600 Oakland Avenue, St. Louis, Missouri 63110.
Email: ljohnson756@stlcc.edu

Susan Wright, *Dean, Business Information Systems*

For further information, contact the author at Georgia Piedmont Technical College, DeKalb Campus, 495 North Indian Creek Drive, Clarkston, Georgia 30021.
Email: wrights@gptc.edu