INVESTING IN Department Chairs

By Susan K. Gardner
and Kelly Ward

Investing in Department Chairs to Create Institutional Change

"My department chair is a wonderful role model."

"My chair is interested in all aspects of the department."

"Our chair is fantastic. She creates a very positive climate for all."

"There is poor communication between our chair and the faculty. The chair makes decisions without discussion."

"My department chair bullies faculty members and it creates an environment where people are afraid to disagree with him."

"I have started keeping my office door shut to avoid having the department chair come in and say inappropriate things to me."

The above examples show two extremes: a department where the chair is highly valued by its faculty and contributes to a positive climate and, conversely, a chair who is seen as a bully and is perceived as a detriment to the work environment. While it is likely that many academic departments fall somewhere in between these two extremes, it is also clear that department chairs play a significant role in the department's work environment and climate. As Robert Cipriano (2011) put it, "Department chairs set the tone and culture in their department" (p. 19).

Culture and tone make a difference to faculty. For example, Monk-Turner and Fogerty (2010) found that faculty members who feel more welcome in their departments are more productive than those who feel less welcome. Similarly, Burnett and associates (2012) found that a more collegial department resulted in less attrition among faculty. Department chairs are vital to faculty productivity and retention. Department chairs matter.

The motivation for this article comes from our experience as administrators, researchers of topics related to faculty and graduate studies, and our involvement in major institutional transformation grants funded by the National Science Foundation (NSF) ADVANCE program. These grants are designed to foster organizational change to create more hospitable environments for women in disciplines related to science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM).

We work at two very different types of research universities (University of Maine and Washington State University),

but share experience with the important role chairs play to carry out institutional transformation. As we conducted surveys about faculty job satisfaction and department climate we repeatedly heard quotes like those above; we also found correlates and similar outcomes related to the research on chairs like those cited above. For example, at the University of Maine, we learned that department chairs play a key role in creating a department culture supportive of work-life balance. At Washington State University, we found that chairs play an important role in faculty performance and satisfaction as well as in recruitment and retention.

Chairs interpret the university mission to departments and their faculty in leading organizational change. The institutional transformation that NSF was seeking from grantees and the type of change anticipated by ADVANCE grants depended to a great extent on changing departments, with a focus on the department chair. Without department chairs' cooperation and support, however, such change was doomed to fail.

In this perspectives piece, we describe our efforts in utilizing literature and research to connect to, support, and partner with our department chairs to create positive cultures and climates for our faculty. Our hope is that this information can support other leaders in supporting organizational change.

Understanding Department Chairs

The department chair is arguably one of the most difficult roles in a college or university. These individuals straddle the often-precarious line between colleague and supervisor, between faculty and administrator, and between the present and the future. For many, the role is a temporary one, a time they take away from their scholarship and teaching to serve their departments, knowing they will ultimately return to their faculty role.

The work of Robert Cipriano (2011), Jeffrey Buller (2006), Walter Gmelch (1995), and others reveals several things about department chairs and the context in which they work. First, most department chairs tend to take on the role out of a dedication to their unit as a service role, rather than because of a desire for upward mobility. A recent study of chairs by Gmelch, Roberts, Ward, and Hirsch (2017) found that the vast majority of chairs (95%) are not interested in moving beyond the chair role into any other leadership position. Second, most department chairs do not receive training or professional development to learn the complex duties the position encompasses. And, third, for all its complexity and work, the role of department chair is often thankless, stressful, and, in some instances, minimally compensated.

Chairs are critical to fostering change and developing faculty, yet many lack training, support, and compensation. How can chairs be enticed into a key role in organizational change when the role is unappealing and unsupported? What support can be provided to assist chairs in initiating and maintaining change?

Creating Change

The key point we want to emphasize is that without chairs lasting institutional change will not take place. Therefore, investing in department chairs was a central focus of our organizational change strategies at both institutions.

Change is an inherent part of higher education but nevertheless difficult to intentionally and successfully accomplish. Kezar and Eckel (2002) studied several large-scale change

Susan K. Gardner, Ph.D. (susan.k.gardner@maine.edu) is Director of the University of Maine's Rising Tide Center for Equity and Inclusive Excellence and the Women's Gender and Sexuality Studies Program, along with her role as Professor of Higher Education. Her research focuses on the intersections of individual development and success within higher education cultures and structures. Data for this article emanate from a $3.3 million grant from the National Science Foundation's ADVANCE program, for which she served as Co-PI.

Kelly Ward, Ph.D. (kaward@wsu.edu) is Vice Provost for Faculty Development and Recognition at Washington State University where she is also Professor of Higher Education, having previously served as the chair of the Department of Educational Leadership, Sport Studies, and Educational/Counseling Psychology. Dr. Ward is interested in faculty issues including integration of teaching, research, and service; work and family concerns for faculty and leaders; faculty career development; and faculty diversity in STEM.

(Editor's note: Dr. Kelly Ward passed away suddenly as this article was in press. Her co-author, Susan Gardner, writes, "Kelly was a beloved colleague, mentor, friend, mother, and wife. Her scholarship and her leadership worked in tandem and this article reflects that important value. She will be sorely missed.")

projects at various universities and suggested five components to support lasting change:

1) Staff development
2) A robust design
3) Senior administrative support
4) Collaborative leadership
5) Visible action

We use these components to frame the role of chairs in facilitating long-term and meaningful institutional change.

Staff Development

What does it mean to support chairs when the position is, in the words of one our chairs, a position that "no one aspires to; nobody wants to do it"? Moreover, from the research on department chairs, we know that chairs are a short-term workforce that receive little training in taking on the chair role.

Given this context, it is perhaps not immediately obvious why we chose to focus so centrally on department chairs to undergird our change efforts. While these chairs were arguably short-term administrators, they were also critical liaisons between faculty members and the administration. They played an important role in shaping and driving cultural change and helped realize institutional missions. They oversaw department climate initiatives and created environments that could entice new faculty to join them, including assisting in faculty development and promotion efforts, and were critical to hiring a quality and diverse faculty. And, for some, they used this department chair experience to consider continued upward mobility as future deans, provosts, or presidents.

Supporting department chairs meant professional development. As we detail below, the emphasis on the staff development of chairs was vital to every aspect of the other four components of the change model and efforts instituted on our campuses.

A Robust Design

When deans, provosts, or faculty development professionals consider implementing professional development and support for department chairs, they should begin by thinking of the whole rather than individual parts. Specifically, professional development and support for chairs should not be stand-alone events or activities. Instead, those involved with planning such efforts should think about how a series of events and initiatives can comprehensively represent a larger and more cohesive campus-wide effort in training chairs, developing both hard and soft skills.

For example, at the University of Maine, we were focused on several larger goals as part of the ADVANCE grant efforts related to faculty retention. Accordingly, each year's activities and professional development programs for department chairs were organized around a larger theme (e.g., creating positive department climates, faculty collegiality, and creating supportive work-life environments). The events for the year were all organized around the theme. Such an approach helped spread our message in a myriad of ways, allowed for depth, and provided continuity in conversations throughout the year and beyond. Such an approach to staff development for chairs is a way to create community among chairs and focus on a particular topic that is important to the institution.

Senior Administrative Support

Just as chairs are important to carrying out institutional change and supporting faculty, they can only be successful with support from senior administrators. Without support from deans, chairs will find it difficult to lead change and support their faculty. Similarly, without support from the provost, deans may not always see the need to support chairs' professional development efforts or be held accountable for it. An important component to a comprehensive approach to department chair professional development, therefore, is the support of senior administrators on campus.

A common theme in research about organizational change is the need for a design that is simultaneously bottom-up and top-down. For chairs who exist in the liminal space of administration and faculty the bottom up-top down approach is essential. In our work and in our research, we learned how vital upper administrative support is to gain credibility to lead change and to showcase the support that department chairs have on their campuses.

Support and buy-in from deans was vital to the ADVANCE efforts at both of our institutions. It was important to understand how the context of a given institutional environment would impact our efforts in gaining and using this support. At both Washington State University and the University of Maine we learned early on that, despite the tremendous support of the president and provost expressed in campus-wide emails and mailings to encourage participation in events related to our grants, department chairs ultimately were more attuned to requests and information from their deans. Deans, however, were more apt to listen to the provost. Finding the unique levers and the flow of influence was therefore a vital part of the robust design in place to foster change.

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Similarly, we learned from the Washington State University grant experience how important it was to have senior administrative support and to have mechanisms in place to foster and communicate that support within units. Each college had a liaison to the grant who met regularly and were "in the know" about grant activities and therefore could be in constant communication with their administrative colleagues, including chairs as well as faculty. The ADVANCE program's liaisons have been supported beyond the grant and continue to be integral to maintaining communication.

Collaborative Leadership

Having support of presidents, provosts, and deans is an important part of the investment a college or university makes in its department chairs. At the same time, there are limits to top-down leadership in any change initiative. For example, in some of the policy efforts pursued in our ADVANCE grants we learned early on that upper administrators could create many new policies but without department chairs actually supporting the policies, the new policies were not enacted or enforced.

How to share such information while creating buy-in can pose a challenge. For example, at the University of Maine we knew that department chair training had never been an annual occurrence nor had it been required. Understanding our university's culture as one that is not particularly oriented toward mandatory training, we sought instead to make the training optional but valuable enough that chairs would want to attend.

One way we achieved buy-in for these professional development opportunities was to tie them to the campus priority of faculty retention. At a place like the University of Maine, faculty lines were rarely plentiful and searches were often halted due to budget cuts. Therefore, the focus on how to retain the faculty members already in place was a motivator for many chairs. At Washington State University, we tied themes related to the ADVANCE grant to chair and director meetings. Deans and provosts also participated, therefore making participation a strong expectation.

Buy-in through a collaborative orientation that involved all levels of administrators as well as key faculty leaders was an approach that worked at both institutions. For example, at Maine we involved a changing group of experienced chairs to join with us to design the chair training and facilitate it each year. The collaborative model worked well. In the five years of the grant at the University of Maine, up to 80% of department chairs attended this professional development in a given year, and the large majority attended at least four other voluntary professional development events.

At Washington State University, collaborative leadership was carried out by using the liaisons within each college to communicate information about the grant activities to their units and also the collaboration between the provost and deans. These collaborative efforts helped facilitate communication and increase participation in grant activities and have continued. Collaborative leadership was particularly important to support faculty recruitment. Each college had a faculty member or administrator provide direction and training for search committees on how to broaden pools of applicants and on best practices to conduct better searches. These "trainers" had specialized training through the grant and thus were able to provide search committee training and support in their departments. The liaisons and the search committee trainers were critical as collaborators with the grant team and their units. Through collaboration, Washington State University has continued support of the grant activities to bring attention to the support of women in disciplines across the university.

Visible Action

Another key part of change initiatives, according to Kezar and Eckel (2002), is visible action. Initial buy-in is vital but, over time, such support for change will wane if stakeholders do not see visible actions that continue to come from change initiatives.

A key component of visible action at Washington State University is broad dissemination of ADVANCE activities and involvement in policy development. For example, the website is widely disseminated so chairs are aware of the resources available to support faculty. Further, ADVANCE has continually collaborated with units across campus to co-sponsor events (e.g., a publishing workshop and visiting speakers). The ADVANCE initiative also provides grants for research support and external mentorship that have been visible. Another element of visible (and sustainable) action is the role that ADVANCE has played in policy development (e.g., updating the language related to parental leave policies). Such visibility has promoted ADVANCE as not just a project, but as a resource and organizational unit that gets things done.

At the University of Maine, the department chair development and support efforts sought to demonstrate continued development and responsiveness to the chairs' concerns. Through regular data collection efforts—such as chair surveys, interviews, and the evaluation data from various events—we learned about chairs' needs, desires, and gaps

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in information. One program we created, based on surveys, was a regular Department Chair Breakfast to help promote connection to other chairs on campus for advice and support. The breakfast events were successful because they fit the need of chairs. The sessions were informal and based on topics suggested by the chairs and related to the theme of faculty retention.

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Conclusion

Faculty are integral to carrying out teaching, research, and service missions at their institutions. Without support from department chairs, faculty are may end up dissatisfied and even leave. Chairs are vital to recruiting a quality and diverse faculty and providing leadership and direction for them. Chairs, however, are also a short-term and sometimes reluctant workforce that often goes unattended and lacks proper orientation, training, and support.

For institutions looking to create stronger chair leadership, including broadened participation of chairs in change initiatives and more engagement for faculty development and recognition, we have offered a framework to develop and monitor chair support. The examples we provide from our own institutional change initiatives are meant to stimulate thinking for what is possible and necessary to support chairs in any given organizational setting. The health and future of higher education depends on a quality and diverse faculty and knowledgeable chairs to support them. C

Resources

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