

Recruiting Department Chairs (When No One Wants the Job):

Some Modest Advice

Department Chair searches have become the fastest growing aspect of our practice – *and it's not even close*. Internal searches on campuses continue to fail at an alarming rate across all colleges and disciplines interrupting department effectiveness, extending voids of leadership, and toppling the reputations of programs. And yes, it's impacting the students – remember them?

Here we explore some considerations to ensure a successful search outcome. Additional considerations may be found at “Time in the Barrel: The Challenge of Persuading Professors to Be Department Chairs”

<https://www.harrisandassociates.com/web/z/1/76/Insights/#sthash.sHLNx138.dpuf> and

“Some Further Thoughts on the Department Chair Role - Implications for Future Searches”

<https://www.harrisandassociates.com/web/z/1/76/Insights/#sthash.sHLNx138.dpuf>),

The job of Department Chair continues to change in complexity. Expectations often outpace the resources provided, and in addition to serving as the first line of administration to faculty, staff and students, with the increased external focus on development of additional funding, the job has become less desirable to many. This is unlikely to change in the near term.

Let's face it, truth be told, serving as a department chair has seldom ranked high among faculty members' aspirations. Publishing in the top-drawer journal of one's discipline can be truly rewarding. Watching as one of your doctoral students is recruited for a very fine university is gratifying.

Performing a new surgical procedure and seeing directly how much it reduces a patient's blood loss? - worth all the years of training.

A lecture to an auditorium of 300 undergraduates enrolled in a freshman-level course few of the students wanted to enroll in and yet have a sizeable group of them cluster around you and ask serious and penetrating questions warms the cockles of the heart of even the most cynical professor.

But serve a term as department chair? No thanks.

More and more these days, we are invited to assist universities in recruiting department chairs, often because no one in the department is willing to "take a turn in the barrel." As a result, deans have to almost conscript a faculty member to serve as "interim chair." And like the portable classrooms brought in on a temporary basis but remaining in use 10-15 years later, the interim chair's term sometimes extends one, two . . . three years.

Or, deans give up on finding a member of the current faculty and invest a full-time, tenured position with which to seek a department chair from another institution. Months later, a pool of 20 candidates has developed thanks to entreaties or, as is often the case these days, an advertisement to which the same serial applicants respond to despite lacking credentials to meet even minimal requirements.

Now that we have set out some of the reasons the department chair position has become so difficult to fill. Here, we offer our experiences in what is meant to be friendly advice to the faculty members and deans seeking to recruit a chair....

#1 – Know for sure why no one in the department wants the job. Beyond the reasons cited above, be as clear as possible as to why no one in the department is willing even to consider taking on the job. A frequent factor is frayed relations among senior faculty sufficiently toxic to cause most other members to decline trying to manage the conflict.

Moreover, awareness of acrimony within the department is critical in recruiting from outside, as the “bad blood” may surface at the worst of times, say, on-campus interviews of finalist candidates.

But even if peace reigns during visits, no candidate ought to leave an interview without being told of any caustic relationships s/he will be called on to manage.

#2 – Great academic credentials, but can s/he lead? Do not lose sight of the fact that you are attempting to recruit someone to **administer** the affairs of the department and **manage** day-to-day operations. Candidates’ academic credentials will be scrutinized, and their scholarly and teaching accomplishments duly noted and evaluated. The criteria for tenure and full professorial rank may be absolutely spot on when assessed against a candidate’s portfolio and that is important. Still, the relationship between academic excellence and intellectual prowess, on the one hand, and, on the other, managerial effectiveness is by no means necessarily a clear, positive, and strong one.

Success in leading major undertakings such as large research projects, chairing a campus-wide examination of undergraduate curricula, or working with other faculty to identify ways for doctoral candidates to actually complete their degrees and not be perpetually all-but-dissertation status.

In our experience at research universities, the satisfaction of professorial academic standards is essential: after all, in a profession built on peer review, even or especially department chairs must be and must be seen to be a peer. However, as much and even more scrutiny ought to be directed to determining whether the candidate can actually carry out the chair position responsibilities.

#3 – What’s on the near-term agenda? Have a shared sense of what a new chair will be called on to decide early in her/his term at the helm. A steady stream of assistant professors – sometimes cohorts – coming up for tenure can occupy a chair’s time and energy.

The assignment of offices and laboratories when occupying a new facility is fraught with potential conflict, as is any suggestion of revising teaching course loads or changing the frequency with which faculty members’ courses are offered.

If retirements are in the offing under a new chair’s service, how sure is everyone that the positions remain in the department or are redirected to other programs? And even if the position is retained, what direction will new hires’ specializations move the department and its curricula.

Questions of a candidate’s larger vision for the department are important and a sense of possible strategies for the evolution of existing programs and the development of new programs are all important. Still, a new chair is best served if s/he is informed about issues and opportunities that will likely be on the desk as soon as the new chair arrives. Let candidates know what they may be facing early on.

#4 – Know with certainty what sort of candidates the dean seeks in a new department chair.

This may seem obvious, but as the old saying goes, “Where you stand depends on where you sit.” What members of the department may want – a good colleague, someone who consults closely and frequently – is important and few deans are likely to ignore those considerations.

But a dean sits in another seat and has a somewhat different perspective on the role of a department chair. Knowing, for example, that the dean is determined to diversify the faculty or is looking for a chair who can develop inter-disciplinary and interdepartmental collaborations or is especially keen to establish ties with East African universities ought to

be considered and have bearing on a search committee's recommendation to a dean of semi-finalists and finalists for the chair position. Indeed, it is a wise search committee chair who keeps the dean informed fully of the progress and direction of the search and makes sure those align with the priorities of the dean.

#5 – Provide candidates a clear sense of what is possible for the department, what resources are available and when or how a department chair might develop resources, and the faculty members' individual and collective appetites for change. As noted, most faculty do not harbor secret longings to become department chairs.

But some are excited enough by opportunities to advance their programs, to see junior faculty mature, to enable senior faculty to build on their careers, and to sense the intellectual growth of students. If realizing those entails serving a time as a department chair, then it may be worth consideration. Tempering ambitions with a dose of what is possible informs that consideration and might, just might result in a department chair.