"Motivations to be Chair of a Graduate Department of Sociology"

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The department is at the center of the academic enterprise, and the successful operation of a college or university depends on the academic department and its chair or head (Brann and Emmet 1972; McHenry et al. 1977; Fisher 1978; Tucker 1981). As Waltzer put it, "The University's success depends on the success of its academic departments" (1975:5). Clearly, the chair or department head is in a key position, and those who fill that position are crucial leaders in their institutions (Waltzer 1975; Saunders 1980; Storer 1980; Scott 1981).

Much of the literature that has focused explicitly on chairs has dealt with the selection and evaluation of department chairs. Of this research, Caplow and McGee's (1958) *Academic Marketplace* is probably the best known study of hiring practices and mobility. Like Caplow and McGee (1958), Mobley (1971), Ehrle (1975) and Saunders (1980) focused on the selection process to identify the different methods used by various institutions to select chairs. Still others have concentrated on variations in the length of the chair's term (Eisenberg 1969; Freligh 1973; Storer 1980), the qualifications

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of a chair (Doyle 1953), the advisability of periodic performance reviews for chairs

(Patterson 1966, Dressel, Johnson and Marcus 1970), and what constitutes appropriate

content for chair reviews (Korn and Munz 1992).

Despite the literature in this area, there are no published studies about what

motivates someone to become the chair or head of a graduate department of Sociology.

Why do individuals want to become a department chair or head? What are their

motivations for entering or exiting from this position? Are these motivations highly

individualistic, or are they more universally shared by those who serve as chairs? In this

short article we describe the results of our survey of chairpersons/heads of graduate

departments of Sociology.

Methods

We used the *2003 Guide to Graduate Departments of Sociology* to make a list of

people who were department chairs in 2003. We selected this date because in a related

project we had previously solicited the vita of each chairperson listed in that *2003 Guide

to Graduate Departments*, and we wanted to be able to link the data. After constructing

the initial list, we attempted to verify each individual's current place of employment

through the *ASA Members Guide*, by searching online, and through contacts with

colleagues in their former department. One former chair was deceased and another

could not be located. This resulted in a list of 145 chairs and heads. We initially sent

each person an email invitation to participate in an online survey using Survey Monkey.

This produced 62 responses. We then discovered that some chairs had previously

opted out of all Survey Monkey surveys and did not receive our survey invitation, and

others did not participate for other reasons (i.e., out of the country, didn't have time but agreed to do so later, etc.). Therefore, we sent a hard copy of the survey to the remaining people in our sample via surface mail. This resulted in another 28 responses for a total of 90 (return rate of 62 percent) over the two waves.

The survey consisted of 20 questions that concentrated on the person's motivation for entering and leaving the chair. We asked them to identify the reasons they became chair and the single most important reason for that decision. For those that were no longer chairs, we did the same for the reasons they decided to leave the chair. In addition, we asked about a few structural issues - whether their campus is unionized, the position of the chair with respect to the union, whether there was a fixed term or a rotation, and who appoints/reviews the chair. The survey ended with an open ended question for respondents to share other thoughts that might help us understand why people are motivated to become chairs.

Findings

The first issue was the various reasons that individuals might choose to take on the position of chair/head (85 percent identified themselves as chairs rather than heads). We provided fourteen choices plus the option of an "Other-Specify," and the respondents were able to select multiple responses. When all of the responses were tallied, a number of reasons emerged as important in the decision-making process. The most common choice was "to make an impact on your department," selected by 90 percent of all the respondents. This was followed by "the personal challenge of learning new skills" (45.6%), "for more money or other economic advantages" (40.0%), "to

protect the department" (30.0%), and "the desire to mentor faculty" (24.4%). The responses chosen by the fewest respondents were "to enable a later geographic move" (2.2%), "for increased status" (2.2%), "in response to a family situation" (5.6%), and "to be in charge of the hiring process" (8.9%).

The remaining five choices that were provided - "to make an immediate geographic move," "the desire to move into higher administration," "because nobody else would do it," "it was your turn in a rotation," and "to prevent someone else from being chair" - were all selected by 10-20 percent of the respondents. There were a few "Other" responses, but all but two of those were subsequently placed in one or another of the fourteen responses.

It is interesting, however, that when we asked the respondents for the single most important reason they became chair/head, the results are rather different. "To make an impact on the department" was clearly still dominant, with 44.2 percent choosing it. None of the others reached 20 percent. The options, "the personal challenge of learning new skills" and "to make an immediate geographic move" were selected by 11.6 percent of the respondents, followed closely by "because nobody else would do it" with 10.5 percent. The only other response even approaching 10 percent of the respondents was "to protect the department," with 8.1 percent.

With regard to the structural issues, only 20 percent of the respondents indicated that their campus was unionized. The bulk of the respondents (85.6%) reported that they did serve for a fixed term, and the most common term was 3 years (60.8%).

However, more than one in five reported that they served 5 year terms. Only 10 percent reported that there was a rotation system in place.

For those people who were no longer serving as chair/head of their department at the time of our survey (n=62), we asked about the reasons why they stepped down. As before, we provided a number of choices, and the respondents could choose multiple responses. In this instance, two reasons were most often selected: "to engage in research/writing" (53.2%), and "to return to a regular academic position" (50.0%). The next most frequent choice was "the stress of the position," selected by 32.3 percent of the respondents, followed by "my rotation was up" (25.8 %), and "to give someone else a chance" and "because you accomplished your goals" (both with 21.0%). The only other response selected by more than 10 percent was "retirement" (14.5%).

When we asked for the most important reason for leaving the position, there were once again some interesting differences. "To engage in research/writing" was again the top choice (by 26.4% of the respondents), but "the stress of the position" followed close behind (22.6%). Next was "to return to a regular academic position," with 17.0 percent, followed by "my rotation was up" (13.2%) and "retirement" (11.3%). The only other responses that approached 10 percent were "because you accomplished your goals" (9.4%) and "to give someone else a chance" (7.5%). None of the remaining responses were selected by more than 2 people.

The final question in the survey asked for any thoughts or comments that the respondents thought would help us understand the motivations of people who become chairs/heads. The following are some of the more interesting responses:

"A good chair must have a continuing vision for her/his department that is supported by the department faculty. For long term success, the vision may change, but vision and faculty support are key to having a job that is worth the pain and hours, no matter how much one is paid."

"In the history of our department, chairs have sacrificed their own scholarship to serve the greater good. It has the sense of a calling."

"By retiring early to focus on research and travel, I had an additional bonus. In one fell swoop, I removed carping colleagues, whining students, and overbearing administrators from my life."

"The role of a chair is more like leading and coping with change beyond your control than it is having a vision and manifesting the vision over the course of your tenure as a chair. Higher education changes too much for such stability, so embrace the instability, fly by the seat of your pants politically and economically, and play from the margins. If you have vested interests, you will take too much stress and pain home with you."

"A challenge is that chairs are often energetic, focused people. That means that they are often among the most productive scholars in the department. That is good for their functioning as chairs, but creates (1) a reduction in their scholarly productivity or (2) huge levels of stress and overwork as they try to keep up both dimensions of their work life."

"Being chair is an opportunity to shape the department and has rewards. However, it is a huge commitment. The job demands, however, can be stressful and I eventually was just worn out from it."

Discussion

There is little question that there are many reasons why individuals choose to become chairs/heads and also to leave the position at some point. However, there appear to be some patterns. By and large, our respondents gave reasons for taking the chair that were positive in nature and often altruistic in character - have an impact, personal challenge, protect the department, mentor faculty. Relatively few reported reasons that reflected the desire for status, power or influence. By the same token, the reasons reported for leaving the chair were again largely positive in character - return to

the faculty, do research, move on. However, this was tempered by a dose of negative, mostly centered on the stress of the position.

Thus, the marginal nature of the chair carries with it the positive potential of a position of leadership, even though it is often accompanied by a lack of the necessary control that could enable efficient change. While those who have served as chair of a department may have gone into the situation with a positive outlook and a set of goals, many leave the chair with a view tempered by their experience and the truly marginal nature of the position - between the administration and the faculty (and students) .

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