

7 Questions for Would-Be Chairs

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Advice



Kevin Van Aelst for The Chronicle

By Rob Jenkins April 17, 2017

One characteristic that distinguishes academics from professionals in the corporate world is the former don't necessarily aspire to climb the management ladder. Many professors — perhaps most, and especially the tenured — are content to spend their lives focusing on teaching and research, with no desire to become a department chair or dean.

That said, some faculty members *do* want to scale the ladder of academic administration, the first rung of which is usually department chair. Others may not have pursued a management job but nevertheless find it extended to them. And still others may feel some obligation to "take their turn" at the helm, for the good of their department or simply to share the burden. Professors in all three of those groups, at some point, face the same dilemma: "Should I do this, or not?"

That question, by itself, is far too general and therefore probably unanswerable. Deciding whether a management gig is best for your career — and for you personally — will require a great deal of reflection and self-assessment. Here are seven questions you should be asking yourself before you start the climb.

Why would I do this? Exploring our own motives can be challenging, but before you seek or accept the role of

department chair, it's important that you understand exactly why you want to do it.

Good reasons abound: You believe you have the organizational and people skills to be successful as a middle manager; you feel an obligation to your colleagues or the institution; you aspire to a higher level of administration; you're starting to burn out from years of teaching and change seems attractive; you could use the extra money (assuming there is any).

There's nothing inherently wrong with any of those reasons. Indeed, most faculty members who go into administration would probably cite all of them to some degree. Still, it's vital that you are honest enough with yourself to understand your primary motivations. Only then can you answer the questions that follow.

Am I going to miss the classroom? Not everyone who goes into higher education does so because they enjoy teaching — but most of us do. Especially at community colleges, small liberal-arts colleges, and other teaching-focused institutions, the opportunity to work with students in the classroom is the main reason we get up and go to work every day.

How much chairs get to teach — or have to teach, depending on your perspective — varies widely by institution.

On some campuses, chairs teach nearly a full load, with maybe a course or two of release time in exchange for fulfilling their managerial responsibilities. On other campuses, department heads are more like associate deans and don't teach at all. Instead they have other duties, like fund raising or community outreach, in addition to the usual administrative tasks. Most chairs are still considered teaching faculty and teach perhaps a course or two each year.

So find out how much you would be teaching if you took the job. And if the answer is "not much," then your next question should be, "Am I OK with that?"

Will I mind being chained to a desk? If you've never been an administrator before, you might not realize just how much of a desk job it is. In fact, perhaps the biggest difference between the life of a regular faculty member and that of a chair is that, outside of class times and office hours, the former has much more freedom. When faculty members are done with their responsibilities for the day, they can just leave campus. Often, they can even structure their schedules to spend entire days working from home.

Most department heads can't do that. Barring meetings and so forth (we'll get to those in a moment), one of the chair's main jobs is simply to sit in that office from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. every day — just in case you are needed. It doesn't matter if anyone comes by, or if there's anything to do. You just have to be there.

How much do I hate meetings? No conversation among professors would be complete without some snide reference to the boring and interminable meetings that are so much a part of academic life. Yet most faculty members don't know the half of it.

Other than being available during business hours, a chair's other main obligation is to attend meetings on behalf of the department. Countless meetings. All kinds of meetings. Large meetings and small meetings, important meetings and pointless meetings (sadly, more of the latter than the former). And whether you enjoy those meetings or not, you pretty much have to be there, because otherwise your department's interests won't be represented. Sometimes you can farm out the responsibility, but mostly you just have to go yourself. One of your biggest challenges as chair will be juggling all of those meetings with your other duties, such as preparing reports, scheduling classes, evaluating faculty members — and attending still more meetings.

If the prospect of endless meetings fills you with revulsion, then this might not be the job for you.

How much do I value my work friendships? Another stark reality of becoming chair is that you can no longer be friends with other faculty members in the department. Of course you can still be friendly with them. And you probably do want to remain "friends" on some level, especially if you ever intend to return to the faculty full-time. (You certainly

don't want to be enemies.)

But you cannot continue your former relationships while serving as chair. No more going out to lunch with your BFFs. No more hanging out in their offices shooting the bull. That sort of behavior will quickly be interpreted as showing favoritism — it's one of the surest ways to sow discord in a department. The first time one of your "friends" gets a plum committee assignment or a better annual evaluation than someone else will, at the very least, open you up to accusations of unequal treatment. Avoid that at all costs.

Yes, you can still have friends at work. You'll just have to find them outside your department — perhaps among the other chairs or people at the same level in student affairs. Your friends can't be people who report to you or over whom you might conceivably exercise any authority. If that's a problem — if you have friendships you value too highly in your department to give up — you might not want to be chair.

Where do I see myself going from here? Having some idea what you plan to do after your term as chair ends isn't essential but it can help determine how you behave while in that position.

I've always believed that a chair's primary duty is to support faculty members. That often means standing up for them, and for their interests, in the face of opposition — from above as well as below. If you plan to return to faculty life once you leave the chair, having a reputation as someone who had your colleagues' backs can certainly be advantageous. You will likely be accepted back into the fold with open arms.

Frankly, though, if you hope to keep moving up — to be a dean one day, or eventually a provost or a president — then a pro-faculty mind-set might be a political liability. Whether or not that's a good thing, it's simply a reality to keep in mind at many institutions. To be fair, it's probably possible to be pro-faculty and still navigate the political waters of upper-level administration, if you're savvy enough. But you should certainly be thinking about what kinds of compromises you might have to make as you climb the administrative ladder before you set your foot on the first rung.

Are the money and perks worth it? Let's be honest: At most institutions, the department chair's job doesn't come with a huge raise, if it comes with a raise at all. My first job as chair offered only release time from teaching — no salary bump. And even if you do get a raise, it might not be much more than you could make by teaching in the summer.

That said, most chairs do make more than regular faculty members, and that can be a powerful motivating factor. The position might also come with other perks, such as a nicer office, an administrative assistant, and a certain amount of respect (or at least deference).

Your answers to the other six questions here must be taken into account before you answer this one. If you hate everything about the chair's job — being chained to a desk, attending interminable meetings, giving up some of your best friends — will that be offset by an extra \$10,000 a year or so (if you're lucky)? If you're being honest with yourself, the answer is probably no — unless you really need the money, to the point that you're willing to put up with a less-than-optimal work life.

Nothing I've said here is intended to discourage people from becoming department chairs. Goodness knows, we need good people in those jobs; they're the ones who essentially run the institution. Moreover, there are plenty of good things about being a chair. If you do the job well, you can have a tremendously positive impact on the lives of faculty and students alike. For that matter, you might not have found anything I talked about above particularly objectionable: "Meetings? Sitting at a desk? I can do that."

If so, and if you think you have something to offer, then by all means, apply for the job — or accept the position that's been offered. Just be sure you know what you're getting into.

Rob Jenkins is an associate professor of English at Georgia State University Perimeter College. He is the author of

four books, including [Building a Career in America's Community Colleges](#) . He writes monthly for our community-college column and blogs for Vitae. The opinions expressed here are his own and not necessarily those of his employer. You can follow Rob on Twitter [@HigherEdSpeak](#).