

By TODD A. DIACON

Often you hear central administrators note that the toughest job in the university is that of academic department head. Before the memories of my time in the department fade, I would like to explain why that is so.

I served for more than five years as chairman of the history department at the University of Tennessee at Knoxville before accepting, a short time ago, the job of vice provost for academic operations. The toughest part of the department head's job comes from the fact that you encounter every day the people most affected by your decisions.

As a central administrator, I am now tucked away in a fortress on the edge of the campus. Rarely will I encounter the people whose work I administer and whose expectations I help shape. And when such encounters occur they are (a) scheduled in advance, and (b) thus largely scripted.

By contrast, every week — if not every day — as a department head you bump into a professor you have disappointed, or even angered, by some decision. Furthermore, that professor is often a friend, always a colleague, and often admired for his or her excellence in teaching and scholarship.

That tension is painfully unavoidable, for, at a minimum, department heads must evaluate professors every year and divide up the pool of money available for raises.

In addition, life is messy, so that at myriad other points in the year tense encounters and situations are likely to occur — as when you decide that no, the department doesn't have enough money to cover Professor A's third conference travel request. Or, yes, Professor B will have to teach at 9 a.m. on a MWF schedule even though he is a self-proclaimed afternoon person who is most brilliant on Tuesdays and Thursdays.

The nature of the job means that often you please no one, not even your boss, who, in the case of a department head, is the college dean.

Sometimes you agree fully with an order the dean has given you, yet you know that it will not go over well in your department (for example, when you've been told to reduce significantly the number of "exceeds expectations" ratings you award to faculty members in line for a raise).

At such times, you would like to be a viceroy in the Spanish empire so that you could respond with a polite "obedezco pero no cumplo" (I obey but do not comply).

Other times, you disagree strongly with the dean's proposal or order, but you must carry out the task. And, even worse, sometimes a dean will order you to tell a professor (or your entire faculty) that a decision is entirely yours.

But let's be fair to deans. Often they can see the forest in ways that professors cannot. They have a bigger picture both to paint and to interpret.

The tension here comes from the narratives that faculty members develop to explain decisions and policies made above them. Most of the time, those narratives interpret actions and policies as the products of arrogance, misunderstanding, and even incompetence.

Such conclusions are easy to reach because professors do not have the information that a dean has with which to understand the challenges of the moment, and they are not under pressure from others (in the central administration) to make changes.

Indeed, confronting misguided faculty narratives is the department head's constant task, for it is hard to both convince professors that their interpretations are wrong and to do so in a way that does not make the department head seem like a puppet.

All of those tensions underscore the importance of information. And the importance of sharing information with the faculty points to a final tension in the work of a department head.

I always felt that my primary task as chairman was to facilitate the good work of professors by doing anything I could to make their jobs easier. Mostly that meant dealing with bureaucratic issues, daily demands for decisions, and regular, small policy matters entirely on my own, so that professors would be spared the hassles of governance in order to pursue research and teaching excellence.

Most professors appreciate that arrangement, but some do not, and at times they are correct in their

opposition.

The danger in trying to "protect" your faculty members is that you can disempower them in the process. I certainly was guilty of that. Actions I took that seemed to me to be evidence that I was working on the faculty's behalf were seen by some professors as me trying to keep them from being informed, full participants in the life of the department. The solution I found was to at least involve the members of my departmental advisory committee in the knotty, never-ending list of tasks and decisions so that they would understand what I (and we) faced.

So why on earth would a professor want to be a department head?

It is a vitally important job, and your decisions will have a lasting impact on the department. It can be an exhilarating ride when strategies you helped develop produce notable successes.

As department head you get to share in the accomplishments and triumphs of every professor. You get to feel their excitement when a book is accepted for publication and then wins an award. Often you are honored with the task of informing a professor that she has won a campus award. You participate in a special way in the intellectual life of a group of very talented people.

But the best reason to be a department head is because it provides a unique opportunity for learning. You learn new skills as a counselor, a coach, and a confidant. You learn the importance of fund raising, and, in the process, meet fascinating people from outside the university.

You learn that what motivates one person may alienate another and that there are many different ways to achieve excellence. And you learn to draw on the talents of others and to balance your own weaknesses by relying on the advice of people who see things differently than you do.

In short, being a department head is good training for success in life, both within and beyond academe.

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