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**Know the Vital Players in Your Career: The Chair**

In every department, certain figures can profoundly affect your progress in academe

By David D. Perlmutter

One difficulty in dealing with the "human factor" in academic careers is that we often don't understand the motivations and circumstances of people around us. In talking with graduate students and new faculty members, I frequently encounter some version of the following lament: "And then he did this to me for no reason. ..."

There are indeed supervillains among the professorial and administrative ranks. But people who randomly act badly without purpose are fortunately rare: In my roughly 25 years in higher education, I have met only a handful I would consider probable sociopaths. More likely, other people's actions, both good and bad, are driven by objectives you may not fathom.

In a series of essays starting with this one, I will look at the crucial professional players—found in every academic department, no matter the discipline or the
institution—who can profoundly affect the progress (or lack thereof) of your career. Understanding some of the factors that shape their outlook toward their own jobs and toward you is crucial to getting them on your side, or at least avoiding their outright enmity.

The most crucial dyad for a new faculty member is usually you and your department head. The chair (a catchall title I will use here for ease of reference) might be the person who has the greatest sway over you from the start: in hiring, through the promotion-and-tenure stage, and beyond.

I have written before about "managing up"—i.e., negotiating a relationship with a supervisor. But many young faculty members start their careers with hazy visions of the chair's job and what its occupant "owes" them. The chair should treat you well—out of duty, decency, and self-interest. However, the actions and attitudes of department heads are driven by factors and contexts that you should understand.

Appreciate the chair's position. To paraphrase Bob Dylan, we all serve somebody. Your department chair answers to many people, including, according to the management philosophy of servant leadership, you. But typically the supervisor to whom your chair reports (most likely a dean) is much more of a "boss" for the chair than the latter is for you. For one thing, chairs typically "serve at the pleasure" of the dean—that is, their tenured status as faculty members does not preclude their being fired as department heads at the dean's displeasure, and, as the euphemism goes, "returning to the faculty."

In short, chairs may be powerful, but they are not invulnerable. They most likely have a set of acute goals they wish to achieve in the short, medium, and long term—like, say, getting a new academic program approved. They may also have continuing interests, like maintaining a collegial atmosphere in the department.

The basis of your relationship with the chair, then, can often be gauged by how much you understand what the chair wants and how much you help, or at least don't get in the way.
Clarify mutual expectations A department chair once described to me a typical nightmare of anyone in administration: A faculty member made a request for some very expensive equipment that the department could not afford but that he insisted had been promised to him by the previous chair. Promised orally, that is. And the previous chair was dead.

I have often thought that a majority of disputes in academe could be resolved if people were in the habit of writing down all assurances, made or received, in detail. I myself try to send a "recap and clarify" e-mail after any meeting in which I promise to do anything for anyone.

We're all busy, but your chair is likely to be bombarded with many more requests, some in conflict with one another, than you are. In large departments, hundreds of people—faculty members, staffers, administrators, parents, students—may be asking something of the chair. That your chair does not recall the details of an agreement with you is not an insult; it just may be an error.

So help your chair to help you. Whenever the two of you agree to something, confirm in writing and save the correspondence.

Don't be a pushover, or endlessly pushy. No one cares more about your career than you do. In contrast, even the most benevolent chair has many concerns about the department, and you are but one—perhaps in the scale of things, a minor one. That fact can be somewhat disconcerting to new faculty members who perhaps were "stars" in their Ph.D. programs and were heavily courted during the hiring process. But the hiring honeymoon can't last forever.

You will falter if you follow either of two extremes:

- You are always in the chair's office doorway, insisting, protesting, and radiating an "it's all about me" attitude.
- You ignore the chair, trusting that he or she knows telepathically what you need and will automatically look out for your best interests.
Both approaches will harm your career. Find a middle ground: Protect your rights and interests without being a pest.

Time and timing are important. When I was a department chair, I held a monthly lunch session with the assistant professors (and I still do that as a dean). Such informal get-togethers, with food as a lubricant, are invaluable in ascertaining the feelings and thoughts of young faculty members. I think they found it useful to have a Q&A not only with me but also with their peers. Try to get some time with your chair at least once a month—and not just when you have a problem. Good chairs will look forward to such encounters. (They sure beat budget meetings.)

If you have normal social skills—something not guaranteed in our profession—you probably know that timing is important in face-to-face interactions. As in, the time to ask Dad for gas money was not just after you had scraped the family car against the garage wall. Likewise, after a few months on the job, you will get a sense of the rhythms of the departmental semester and the mood swings of your chair. In some departments, the best time to bring up a new budget request, for example, is very early in the fiscal year, when the department has just gotten a new budget. At other institutions, the optimal moment is the end of the fiscal year, when departments are scrambling to "zero out" their budgets.

The department secretary can help you with timing considerations: "I wouldn't go in there right now; she just had an unhappy budget meeting with the dean."

So think about the "when" of interacting with the chair. Often that makes all the difference between a no and a yes.

Help out once in a while. Some years ago, I visited the principal of my children's elementary school. The evening before, I had witnessed a contentious school meeting about some major issues of curriculum, parking, and after-school care. As I sat down in her office, she presented a weary and wary look, as in, "Oh, God, another parent coming to air grievances." Instead I told her that I appreciated her composure and maturity at the meeting, and that I thought most of us parents, loud squawkers aside,
knew that she was doing her best with limited money. Her jaw dropped; it turned out this was one of the few compliments she'd received in a decade of school administration.

Department chairs don't usually face that much hostility. As a chair, I received enough pleasant comments to balance out the complaints and protests. But a pat on the back is nice now and then.

And we all could use some help. Why not do something nice for your chair once in a while? Volunteer to work on a department project or two. A good chair will remember your assistance and may offer to balance out the new assignment by reducing the rest of your workload in some way.

Don't place all your bets on one chair. Chairs come and go. Sometimes the exit is sudden: They announce they have taken a job elsewhere, they quit in frustration, or they are "returned to the faculty." Sometimes their tenure is cyclical; many departments have a rotating three-year system.

I recall talking to a young assistant professor who was, as he described, "devastated" that his chair was leaving for another position. He explained that the chair had been his greatest champion, and now he worried that he might not get tenure.

Never depend on one person to guarantee your promotion and tenure. Certainly a powerful chair may be a key influencer in the final decision, but he or she has only one vote.

Being the chair's favorite may also not help you. As the book of Exodus reminds us, "There arose a new Pharaoh over Egypt, who knew not Joseph." Your tenure bid should be tied to your merits, and while personal connections can help, you must not rely on the latter at the expense of the former.

So build a good relationship with your chair, but don't ignore the other players who will affect your future. We'll get to them next.
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