

Can Department Heads Be Trained to Succeed?

More colleges are offering orientation programs for new chairmen

By PIPER FOGG

Every morning, when Ronald E. Rice wakes up, he asks himself, "Who am I going to disappoint today?"

Mr. Rice is chairman of one of 150 academic departments on Rutgers University's three campuses. Mr. Rice, who has been a member of the Rutgers faculty for 12 years, is starting his second year at the helm of the communications department here on the main campus. The trouble with being a chairman, says Mr. Rice, is that resources are always scarce. He is constantly letting someone down. "Every day, I have to say no to a lot of people."

But that's just part of his job, Mr. Rice now realizes. Being a chairman, says Mr. Rice, means doing things that, before you were chairman, you didn't even realize needed doing. Mr. Rice has a metaphor for being a department chairman: "In the universe, the predominance of volume is dark matter," he explains, as he pushes back his chair in his cramped but highly organized office. "Becoming chair is like being confronted with the black matter."

Some universities have recognized that in order to succeed as a department head, a faculty member needs to know what he's getting into. Rutgers, much like a host of other institutions nationwide, has created a program that prepares chairmen and chairwomen and emphasizes just how crucial their position is to the institution's overall success. The

training programs offer faculty members both straightforward advice and a support network. Information is scarce on how many programs exist and how long they have been around, so while participants have responded positively, it's hard to tell whether the programs have succeeded.

Skeptics wonder if specialized training programs for department chairmen and chairwomen will further alienate them from the faculty. Others ask if -- despite hours of workshops, impressive online tutorials, and the best of intentions -- the programs do enough to prepare scholars for the challenge of confronting the dark matter.

Before becoming a chairman, a faculty member spends his career managing only his own career. A chairman, by contrast, must be a manager and a leader as well as a scholar and teacher. "We academics have been taught all of our lives to work in isolation, except in the sciences and medicine," says Ann F. Lucas, who formerly headed the doctoral program in clinical psychology at Fairleigh Dickinson University and is the author of three books about leading departments. "We've never been taught to be team players."

The idea of helping professors become team players is not entirely new. The American Council on Education has run annual national seminars for department chairmen since 1992. But "you're only recently having programs picked up as in-house training," says Mary Lou Higginson, vice president for academic affairs and dean of the college at Baldwin-Wallace College, who helped write *The Department Chair as Academic Leader*.

Many colleges and universities traditionally have not offered basic training to chairmen and chairwomen. A 1997 study by the consulting firm Tillinghast-Towers Perrin found that 76 percent of the institutions surveyed offered no training in employee terminations, 65 percent offered no training in disability issues, and 47 percent offered no training in handling sexual-harassment cases.

That's changing. "There's been a change in attitude," says Irene W.D. Hecht, Ms. Higgerson's co-author and the director of the American Council's seminars for new chairmen. The boom in training programs, she continues, "arises from the new accountability issues," especially in public higher education, where there is increasing pressure to show that public funds are being used effectively.

Before Rutgers created instructional programs for chairmen, Mr. Rice says, "administrators would say to new chairmen, 'There's your office, see you later.'" Since then, he says, "There's been a vast improvement."

Rutgers's training sessions are part of the Academic Leadership Program, established with a grant of \$16,000 from the W.K. Kellogg Foundation that has been matched by Rutgers. The program is still a work in progress. But already it offers orientation sessions for new chairmen and deans, an informational Web site (<http://www.odl.rutgers.edu/academicleadership/index.htm>), and luncheon forums on higher-education topics throughout the year -- all designed to make leadership tools more accessible.

That's the general goal of most of the new training programs, but the specific paths they take vary. Some are half-day programs, while others are multi-day retreats. Most programs offer workshops or seminars throughout the academic year. Stanford University, for example, has a three-year-old program financed by a grant from the James Irvine Foundation that includes a day of orientation plus a series of follow-up workshops.

Michigan State University is home to a four-day workshop for new chairmen and a regular seminar series, with more than a dozen programs a year, for all chairmen. Appalachian State University, in Boone, N.C., which began holding occasional training

seminars during the academic year in 1999, has instituted a summertime orientation for new chairmen, so they can be ready by the fall semester.

In most cases, the programs cover legal issues, budgeting, relationships with faculty members, promotion and tenure policies, faculty evaluations, and strategies for conflict resolution. But architects of such programs insist that their goal is not to give new chairmen the answers to every single question about their jobs -- that would be impossible.

Brent D. Ruben, a communications professor who helped design the Rutgers program, just wants to provide venues where chairmen and other administrators can meet to trade knowledge and expertise.

At one such venue in September, chairmen and chairwomen convened here in New Brunswick to get advice -- and hear war stories -- from past and present Rutgers chairmen.

During the discussion, Paul L. Leath, chairman of the department of physics and astronomy, distributed a list he had compiled of 12 requirements for success as a chairman. The list emphasizes commitment, communication, a thick skin, an ability to delegate, and a knowledge of operating procedures. Mr. Leath also advises chairmen to keep up their teaching, because it will gain them respect from faculty members in their departments and provide an escape. Mr. Leath takes the idea of escape so seriously that he has two offices: He can leave the chairman's office and go to his faculty office when he wants to return to his research.

Chairmen and chairwomen gleaned some of the more candid advice of the morning during a question-and-answer period. When asked by a new chairwoman in the audience to describe her worst -- and most difficult -- moment as a department head,

the department of nutritional sciences' chairwoman, Paula B. Voos, mindful of the need for discretion about departmental matters, related an experience from a previous job. During a term as a chairwoman at the University of Wisconsin at Madison, "I eliminated a job to get rid of a staff member," said Ms. Voos. "Some other employee had thought she received an indirect threat of being shot by her. The women said to another [that] she kept a rifle under her bed." Ms. Voos told the audience that the experience had taught her that "you do have to take action, for the good of the whole."

Although department heads appreciate the programs, some question whether the new emphasis on training chairmen will isolate the post from the rest of the faculty -- a problem inherent in the departmental structure to begin with.

"Your relationship with faculty members is automatically different from what it would be if you were a colleague," says David P. Haney, who left Auburn University to lead the English department at Appalachian this year. "You know that they know that you're the one that makes recommendations on what they get paid. You're the one who makes tenure and promotion recommendations."

It's true, concedes Ms. Hecht, the director of the ACE program for chairmen, that becoming a department head requires a faculty member to step out of the professor role. But that's the point. "In you, as a person, there has to be changes when you become a chair. People say they lose all their friends when they become chair," she says. But, she adds, "you have to learn how to deal with problems in a professional way."

Elizabeth S. Boylan, provost and dean of the faculty at Barnard College, agrees that the sessions could make the faculty-chairman split more pronounced. But she argues that the programs can also bridge that divide. "Universities must underscore the idea that you're not just a paper pusher or a bean counter if you're doing your job right. You have

to work against the negative connotation that if you like being the leader you are suspect," she says.

Among those involved in department-head training, the more common complaint is that faculty members change too little, not too much, when they become chairmen. They say that the programs are sometimes skimpy and hurried, or emphasize the wrong topics.

"When there are workshops for new chairs, most colleges focus on the management issues -- like handling the budget," says Ms. Lucas, the former psychology professor at Fairleigh Dickinson. And even if other important topics -- like team-leadership skills and the latest changes in higher education -- are covered, the presentation format can mute the program's effectiveness. Ms. Lucas suggests inviting an expert on meeting planning to help structure the workshops. Otherwise, you run the risk of annoying people by making them sit through boring sessions or simply scaring them off.

"You can have panels, that's fine. But it's not enough," she says. "Plan for a series of monthly meetings -- have ongoing meetings. It's not enough to have one orientation."

Rutgers relies on participants to gauge the value of its sessions. It surveyed them on what they wanted to learn before even establishing its program, and it hands out questionnaires after each workshop or event. "It's not mandatory, so it needs to be responsive," says Mr. Ruben, noting that feedback from last year helped shape this year's agenda. Individual events are shorter and rely less on lectures and more on handouts, he says.

The programs, however, can be improved only so much. "There's no way to learn this job but by doing," Appalachian's Mr. Haney says. "Any chair training is going to be somewhat artificial. The nature of the beast is you learn how to negotiate with the dean by talking to the dean."

Still, the programs do equip chairmen and chairwomen with valuable resources that they can call upon when the need arises. Says Rutgers's Mr. Rice: "I just know now that there are a lot of things I can turn to -- the Web site, the workshops. If a problem is official, if it's systemic, if they've documented it, they can point you to it." Some parts of the job can never be anticipated, he adds, like how he answered the telephone for three months after the department secretary quit. But, he says, the training "pushes back the boundaries of the dark matter."

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