

The Life Cycle of a Department Chair: Transitioning from Faculty to Chair and Beyond or Back

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Abstract

Individuals who accept the role of head or chair may do so for different reasons including personal growth, career advancement, serving the department, or even because others are not willing or able to serve. The perspective of a faculty member may shift significantly as they step into the role of a chair as different challenges and opportunities arise during their term of service.

Previous research has identified desired leadership characteristics from academic leaders and, more recently, from faculty members being directly supervised. However, there is a gap in research on leaders' reflections on their own successful transition into the leadership role as a chair, on maintaining activities to transition back into a faculty role at the end of their term of service, or identifying practices to transition to other administrative roles in the university or beyond.

Using surveys of current and past chairs, the goals of this study are to characterize:

- Faculty perceptions and expectations of chairs' role prior to becoming a leader.
- Useful practices to transition into the chair role.
- Strategies to maintain teaching, research, and service activities and professional development while serving as a leader.
- Useful practices to transition to other administrative roles.

This paper may be of interest to faculty considering service as a department chair, currently serving in that role, or considering options upon completion of their term.

Introduction

The department head or chair role is often considered one of the most demanding leadership positions in academia, serving as a link between faculty and university administration. Inevitably, challenges arise due to the sometimes-competing priorities and differing agendas of faculty and administration. Successful department chairs support faculty and student success while simultaneously being responsive to demands at the university level and changes in higher education landscapes. At the department or program level, chairs are responsible for faculty recruitment and retention, curriculum advancement and innovation, as well as student recruitment, retention, and success [1]. Chairs also have a myriad of administrative duties like balancing budgets, managing staff, ensuring sufficient office and lab space, and ensuring the safety of all personnel. Department chairs need to have – or gain – experience in change management, partnership building, and anticipating and managing institutional roadblocks. These areas of expertise transcend typical skills learned through teaching or research preparation and development. Although research may create opportunities to develop some of these skills, faculty buy-in is different from graduate student management; hence, department chairs need knowledge and skills beyond what is developed in the faculty member role [2].

The pandemic shed additional light on the importance of faculty mental health. Bourgeault et al. [3] surveyed faculty and found that almost two-thirds of academics reported mental health issues, such as anxiety, psychological distress, depression, and burnout, at some point in their career. Flannery [4] affirmed these findings. Thus, department chairs must address their own well-being as well as their professional development, and in many cases, they are also called upon to lead in times that are challenging for others [5].

The literature offers suggestions, guidance and recommendations on activities and strategies to be successful as a chair [6] [7] [8]. The Wiley Online Library regularly publishes “The Department Chair,” an online journal that serves as a resource to advance and disseminate successful strategies for leading an academic department.

Although there is a significant body of scholarship on serving in the chair role, there is a gap in research on leaders’ reflections on transitioning successfully into the leadership role as a chair, on maintaining activities to transition back into a faculty role at the end of their term of service, or identifying practices to transition to other administrative roles in the university or beyond. The paper seeks to support the transition into an academic leadership role and beyond, namely, transitioning back to the faculty role or to other academic leadership roles. This paper reports on the results of surveys of current and past chairs to provide insights into:

- Faculty perceptions and expectations of chairs’ role prior to becoming a leader.
- Useful practices to transition into the chair role.
- Strategies to maintain teaching, research, and service activities and professional development while serving as a leader.
- Useful practices to transition to other administrative roles.

The department chair may be elected by the faculty, appointed by the dean or other administrator, selected or appointed from outside the department, or there may be a rotation process by which faculty take turns to serve in this position [9]. Individuals who accept the role of head or chair may do so for different reasons including personal growth, career advancement, serving the department, or even because others are not willing or able to serve. The perspective of a faculty member may shift significantly as they step into the role of a chair as different challenges and opportunities arise during their term of service. The average term of service as a department chair is 6 years, with appointments varying from 3 to 5 years [10]. Terms may be fixed, renewable, or may be subject to periodic review by deans and/or faculty. Chairs’ reflections on transitioning into and out of the chair role successfully may be of interest to faculty considering service as a department chair, currently serving in that role, or considering options upon completion of their term.

Academic Leadership

Although good management practices serve the department faculty, staff, and students, the department chair role requires leadership skills and knowledge beyond a managerial position. The department chair must focus on structure, policies, processes, and paperwork; however, leadership involves shaping department culture, and supporting students, faculty, and staff in their development [11] [12]. Baker [13] believes a successful department chair must possess

leadership, management, and personnel skills. A faculty survey on supportive leadership found that faculty prioritized department chair efforts related to recruiting and developing people, organization and resource management and goal setting and change management over decision making [2]. Moreover, the research showed that faculty valued professionalism and leadership qualities as well as effective communication and interactions with others over personal qualities [2]. Unfortunately, many faculty members enter the department chair position with little to no training to adequately or successfully serve in this role [13]. To aid faculty in the transition to the department chair role, some institutions are providing professional development training for new chairs (e.g., Michigan Technological University), or universities may pay for new chairs to complete training offered by third parties such as Excellence in Academic Leadership (EAL), Academic Impressions, or the Chronicle's "Strategic Leadership Program" [2]. Professional development opportunities can enhance the individual's likelihood of success and satisfaction as chair.

Leadership transitions

Due to the often-transitory nature of the department chair position, faculty members may find themselves returning to the faculty, transitioning to other administrative roles (i.e., dean, associate dean), taking on administrative roles within the institution or elsewhere, or retiring. Gmelch [14] noted that 70% of department chairs return to their faculty position, 20% move into administration, and 10% retire from their positions. Gmelch [14] believes push and pull forces influence chairs to move. Push factors include the loss of faculty support, incompatibility with the dean, poor job fit, and poor personal fit. Pull factors include returning to their research agenda, completion of chair goals to create the impact they wanted, looking for a new challenge, and a slump in the learning curve (i.e., lack of intellectual stimulation). Other reasons for a transition include exhaustion and burnout.

Schnepp et al. [15], developed a matrix to assist faculty conducting a self-reflection to determine the next step in their career. Key factors to consider at any leadership inflection point include whether the time is right for the change, whether the opportunity will lead to growth, and what impact the individual can make in this leadership position.

Steps can be taken to smooth the transition into the chair role. Willie-Libreton [16] suggests taking the pulse of the entire department, including staff, to know what works well and to learn issues and concerns; being transparent in representing the department honestly within the department and to external stakeholders; reaching decisions, valuing teamwork, and leading with integrity, consistency, and transparency. The paper presented by Sloan et al. [2] confirms these findings. Guinn and Carbajal [17] propose strategies to avoid common leadership pitfalls, including identifying key influencers, respecting traditions while leading progress, keeping faculty and staff informed, implementing gradual change, creating a transition road map, and keeping student experience at the core of the program's efforts.

Gmelch [14] identified strategies that outgoing chairs can use to improve the transition of the department to the new department chair. These strategies include providing guidance and assurance to the most vulnerable personnel, specifically, tenure-track faculty and staff, during the transition, and completing necessary tasks so that the new chair can start with a clean slate. On a

more practical note, it is also important to consider file management, electronic file access sharing, policy and procedure sharing, and inviting the new chair to participate in meetings, decisions, and approval requests to reduce the new chair's transition time and energy [18].

To assist in effective leadership succession and knowledge transfer, it may be useful, well in advance of stepping down, for the chair to identify potential candidates for future leadership within the unit, and delegate some specific responsibilities to allow those individuals to learn and grow. Cain [19] suggests the outgoing chair should minimize opportunities to compare and contrast approaches to running the department and realize that priorities may be different for the new chair; thus, the outgoing chair should let the new chair breathe and lead. The outgoing chair can take steps to ensure the transition supports the department by supporting junior faculty through tenure and promotion efforts, mentoring junior faculty in teaching and research, embracing their new department role, avoiding complaint sessions, accepting service, and sharing learned experiences to benefit the department [19]. One potential transition strategy is for the outgoing chair to take a sabbatical before returning to the faculty.

Smith [9] noted that an incoming chair might be focused on the excitement of the role, the potentially steep learning curve, and the many new responsibilities at the beginning of the journey. However, Smith also suggests that considering the terms of the position and the conditions for a transition out are just as important as negotiating the terms of acceptance. Topics to consider in the negotiation process include supplemental pay, reduced teaching load, graduate assistants, travel funds, funding and support for initiatives, length of appointment, staff assistance, mentoring, and professional development. Clarifying expectations during the appointment process can improve the outgoing chair's return to faculty. Since it might not be practical to maintain prior levels of work in research, teaching, and service along with the new administrative duties, it is important for a new chair to decide which prior activities to let go.

Situations that can further complicate transitions into or out of the chair role include being appointed to serve as an interim chair or to step from the chair position into an interim administrative role (e.g., Dean, Associate Dean, or other). McGinnis and Green [20] describe strategies to transition into interim or permanent leadership roles in the preparation, entry, delivery, and exit phases. The authors emphasize the importance of aligning expectations, communicating clearly, and adapting leadership models effectively to smooth the transitions into leadership roles that can sometimes appear with little advance notice.

Personal Wellbeing and Work-life Balance

Individuals in the chair position must manage the many demands of the position in addition to requests from, or resolve issues for, students, faculty, staff, administrators (dean and provost), alumni, and even families of students. To keep up with these demands, department chairs may find that they are neglecting their personal well-being and relationships. Without intentionally finding time to exercise, decompress from work, and maintain good eating and sleep habits, the role can negatively affect the department chair's health and relationship with others [12]. Inadequate professional development prior to taking on the chair role can also lead to a sense of isolation or burnout [21]. It is also important for a chair to model healthy self-care, so that faculty take care of themselves.

Brown and Linn [22] noted the importance of accepting that issues and problems will arise, but the authors suggest that approaching the job with creativity, as well as connectedness with students and faculty can lead to balance. In a recent study, Palmer [23] suggested that having family nearby can reduce faculty anxiety. A more practical approach to surviving the department chair gauntlet, leading to work-life balance, is to keep perspective, avoid tendencies toward perfectionism, be kind, and nurture a healthy state of mind [24]. A frequently cited recommendation is included among instructions that flight attendants give airline passengers: put your oxygen mask on first then take care of other passengers.

Methods

Department chairs, department heads, and program chairs, hereafter referred to as department chair for simplicity, are typically selected or volunteer from among the faculty. While some may have prior leadership experience in an academic or other context, many may be new to the leadership role. This study aims to characterize faculty perceptions and strategies to transition into and out of the chair role and to manage chair duties while in the role.

A survey was administered to current and former chairs to characterize their perceptions and reflections on their expectations of chairs' role prior to becoming a leader. Given that the chair typically serves in the role for three or more years and that the individual may return to the faculty or move into administrative positions, the survey also asked for useful strategies to maintain teaching, research, and service activities and professional development while serving as a leader. Finally, the survey asked for practices to transition back to the faculty or to other administrative roles.

The survey was distributed to the list of current Civil Engineering department chairs maintained by the ASCE Department Heads Coordinating Council (DHCC), posted on the ASCE DHCC Collaborate site, the ExCEED Community Collaborate site, and sent to individual past-chairs known to the study authors. The survey questions shown in Appendix A were administered through Qualtrics and were distributed with the York College of Pennsylvania IRB approval (IRB# 25FA023).

Results & Discussion

Fifty-two full or partial survey responses were received as of March 11, 2026. Survey participants provided 485 responses to the open-ended questions, some with multi-part answers that were separated for analysis. Similarly themed comments were grouped into categories and are presented in the tables below. The number of comments in each category is shown together with some comments that were either representative or seemed particularly unusual and useful for those in leadership positions. Many respondents were very forthright in their self-assessment or consideration of the chair's role. Responses to the survey questions and the open-ended questions are summarized below. We did not attempt to correlate text responses to demographics because many responses and themes were similar regardless of demographics.

Demographics

Table 1 shows demographic information about survey respondents. Fewer survey participants were new to the chair role (less than 1 year of service) or very experienced (greater than 10 years in the role) and the majority of respondents were evenly distributed between those in or near the first term and those with multiple terms. A large majority assumed the role at the institution where they worked prior to becoming chair. Over 75% of the respondents were still in the chair role.

A wide range of engineering disciplines were represented among the survey respondents, with civil engineering, environmental engineering, and construction engineering being the most common. All respondents represented four-year institutions, with public Ph.D. granting institutions being the largest population.

Table 1. Demographic information about survey respondents.

How long have you served (did you serve) as chair?	0 to 1 year	2 to 4 years	5 to 10 years	>10 years
Number of respondents	9	20	18	5
Where did you assume the chair position?	Same institution		Different institution	
Number of respondents	43		9	
Have you left the chair position?	No		Yes	
Number of respondents	39		12	

Motivations for assuming the chair role

As shown in Table 2, participants had a variety of motivations for assuming the chair role. The most common responses show that incoming chairs value the opportunity to lead and serve the department. Three respondents who selected “other” provided additional comments, as shown in Table 3. One comment addressed sheltering the program from a dean while the other two comments addressed opportunities to have a positive influence on the department.

Table 2. Survey participants’ motivation for assuming the chair role.

Motivation	Number of respondents
Opportunity to serve the department	45
Leadership opportunity / develop new skills	33
Desired career advancement to upper administration	18
Salary increase	16
My turn / obligation	14
Fear of having another (specific individual) serving as chair	13
No one else available	8
Desired breadth of experience at another institution	4
Other	3

Table 3. Summary of responses to the question: “What motivated you to accept the chair position?”

Category	No. of responses	Selected comment(s)
Damage control	1	Fending off a poor dean from doing damage.
Improve systems, new direction	2	I felt that I could address issues that I'm not sure others were even aware of.
Other	2	- Better geographic location - My colleagues expressed support for me to apply

Engaging in faculty responsibilities as chair

Table 4 shows the number of respondents reporting their level of involvement with typical faculty functions after becoming chair compared to their pre-chair involvement with the same activities. It appears common for survey participants’ teaching, research, and work-life balance to decrease compared to their pre-chair activities and for professional service and professional development to remain at similar levels or increase.

Table 4. Survey participants’ engagement in other aspects of faculty work while serving as chair.

Describe how the following activities changed after you took over the chair role.	Significantly more than before	Slightly more than before	Same as before	Less than before	None
Teaching	0	3	13	35	2
Research	1	2	13	35	2
Professional service	9	11	25	8	0
Professional development	2	12	25	13	1
Maintaining a healthy work-life balance	0	1	21	31	0

A summary of responses to a question about unexpected elements of the chair’s role is shown in Table 5. The greatest number of responses addressed the time commitments, faculty, variety of duties or small “fires” associated with the position, and the administrative burden. Other challenges included managing faculty and the lack of direction associated with the role. Chairs also reflected on their ability to have a positive influence on the faculty and department, but one person noted “how little faculty appreciate the work a chair does,” which can be a source of frustration if not addressed.

Tables 6 through 9 present a summary of comments in response to questions on how the chairs make time for effective teaching, research, service, and professional development, respectively. As discussed previously, in some cases, the chairs reduced their participation in these other areas, if possible. However, the chairs also identified effective strategies that include blocking off time to focus on other activities, shifting efforts to weekends, evenings, or summers, prioritizing activities that serve multiple purposes such as adjusting their research focus to areas that overlap with chair responsibilities, using resources (including student assistants or asking for resources from the dean), and choosing responsibilities carefully (e.g., taking on no new course preparations). Unfortunately, in some cases, the responses showed that chairs found it very

difficult to make time for research and professional development, which are important for transitioning back to the faculty or for moving into other positions after the chair role.

Table 5. Summary of responses to the question: “What surprised you most about the chair role?”

Category	No. of responses	Selected comment(s)
Significant time commitment	9	- I discovered that a big reason I had been able to focus on research and teaching was that my previous chairs had shouldered a huge administrative load on behalf of the rest of the department. - The time consuming requirement to serve as general contractor for lab remodels.
Email volume	3	The incredible volume of email and small decisions/approvals that have to be constantly attended to.
Volume/variety of duties, hidden work, constant tasks, decision making	18	- The variety of challenges that the chair needs to address. And all of these challenges, as simple as they might be for me, need to be taken seriously because it is important for someone. - The difficulty in getting something done that you wanted to do because "fires" always appear (the current situation with Federal funding/budget cuts, managing web accessibility, grad student unionization).
Menial tasks	2	The job involves so much Mickey Mouse minutiae.
Faculty quirks and concerns	9	- That I could not always support every faculty on everything. - How difficult it is to get assistance from fellow department members.
Administrative burden, institutional / financial challenges	5	- The fierce competition for institutional resources (faculty positions and \$\$) among departments surprised me the most. I knew this existed, but to a larger degree [than] what I was expecting. - Lack of support, understanding, concern from College Administration. - The many processes that seem unnecessarily complicated
Positive – personal development or ability to help	6	- I can't believe I'm saying this as I am totally spent right now, but I have found it more enjoyable than I expected. I love the department and people and feel I can help through my position as Chair. - I was pleasantly surprised that, with the one course release per semester, my enjoyment of my teaching went up, plus the new challenges, on the whole, satisfied my other needs to want to work with colleagues more. - How satisfying it is to shape the department for years into the future through faculty recruiting, mentoring, and development.
Personnel, culture	7	- How much of the job is [affected] through 1:1 communication and how much the chair can impact department culture. - Prior to becoming chair, I had served in leadership positions in the military, state government, and a consulting engineering firm. My biggest surprise in becoming chair was dealing with conflicting expectations of the faculty, staff, and administration. This was different from any other leadership position I held in the past. - The faculty and staff were very willing to pitch in to help make sure the Department was still successful while I learned the ropes - The number of people who would try to undermine me because they wanted the position.
Lack of succession, specific roles	6	- Lack of "operations manual", Lack of training for budget/ software/ what a chair is. - Learning institutional rules / policies is difficult when there is little documentation.
Other	5	- Disparity between responsibility for certain aspects of departmental function and authority provided. - How little faculty appreciate the work a chair does.

Table 6. Summary of responses to the prompt: “Please describe one strategy employed to make time to teach effectively while serving as chair.”

Category	No. of responses	Selected comment(s)
Take on activities that serve multiple purposes	2	• The more buckets I could see the activity contribute to, the more likely I was to do it. • Making sure that I taught at least one required undergraduate course so I'd know every student who graduated from my program.
Use effective teaching strategies	5	• Use the ExCEED model - organize materials with the intent of saving time next time. • Flip the classroom. You will get less questions outside class and a better connection with students. • Incorporate the KEEN Framework... Thoughtfully incorporating mindset learning outcomes to skillset set outcomes has made an effective teacher while ... using my prep time efficiently.
Prioritize teaching	3	• I enjoy teaching, my institution values it very highly, deadlines in teaching are obvious • Put students first.
TA/GA, efficient grading strategies	9	• Use TA/GA time to the extent possible, setting up rubrics to help them grade. • Automation of tasks - use of software to save time.
Stay home, avoid office to get work done, block off time	6	• Block off calendar for course prep.
Teach courses previously taught, multiple sections of same class, co-teach, teach fundamental courses	17	• Avoid new preparations. This helped preserve time and focus for students while balancing the significant administrative demands of the chair role. • Teach fundamental courses, typically sophomore level, that require less prep. • Don't schedule myself to carry too high of a teaching load.
Reduced teaching load	4	• Teach fewer classes so that I can focus on those classes more effectively.
Adjust prep time, time management	5	• Do not schedule meetings before the class. • I do a lot more prep over the summer for my fall class.
Other	2	• I had to reduce the amount of outside consulting that I was doing • Teach[ing] courses I like teaching to provide motivation to do it off hours.

Table 7. Summary of responses to the prompt: “Please describe one strategy employed to make time to conduct research while serving as chair.”

Category	No. of responses	Selected comment(s)
Stay home, avoid office to get work done, block off time	15	- Assigned time for research group meetings, set aside time for paper and proposal writing. - I block one day and work from home. I try very hard to minimize email that day (I wait until I've finished a main research task until I check it) and I do not schedule meetings for that day.
Collaborate with others	8	- I seek collaborative projects with excellent co-I's who know that I will have limited flexibility and time. They have clearly scoped roles. - Collaborative pedagogy-related research with colleagues at other institutions, which allowed shared effort and sustained progress despite the time demands of the chair role. - I have brought in other faculty (mostly junior faculty) to co-advise PhD students.
Undergraduate, graduate students, post docs	9	- I have asked the dean to support a postdoc and that has helped. - I'm at a mostly undergrad university. I find that working with undergrads over the summer is a good way for me to keep my foot in the research game.
Prioritize research, deprioritize other tasks	1	Take risk in other areas (consciously spend time on research to the exclusion of other tasks on my plate/spending less time on other things than I normally would).
Shift research time, use weekends, summers and breaks	5	- Time consuming work (writing, editing) always seems to take place on weekends. - Use summers as much as possible. Chair duties are much less in the summer.
Adjust research focus, effort	3	- Most of what I'm doing now is "less heavy duty" in the sense that I'm enjoying collaborating with others in practice in writing various types of case studies and lessons learned types of discussion pieces. - Some of my effort has turned toward helping the Department pursue new research-related initiatives. - I have actually chased larger grants while serving as chair; larger budgets allow me to staff the project correctly, rather than scraping my way through.
Management	4	- Creating long term research strategy planning and proposal planning and then short term execution strategy for implementation. - Finding the balance between responsibilities is a factor for all faculty positions. Ensuring adequate time for scholarship is simply a time management exercise.
Very difficult, work all the time	12	- That's been quite difficult finding time and making a priority. - Tried to delegate administrative task work but had little success. - This simply came out of my hide and required additional work.

Table 8. Summary of responses to the prompt: “Please describe one strategy employed to participate in professional service activities while serving as chair.”

Category	No. of responses	Selected comment(s)
Shift service time, use weekends, summers and breaks	7	• Weekends or weekday evenings. • I use travel time to accomplish tasks that are hard to do while I'm in the office.
Prioritize meaningful activities or activities that serve multiple purposes	17	• I take on only those service activities directly related to my chair duties, so that there was a benefit to my role as chair. • Attend chair / department head workshops at the institution and through the professional society. • Review submitted journal articles and serve as an external reviewer for tenure decisions fairly frequently. That counts as service but it also helps me keep up with the research in my field.
Stay engaged – still possible (especially with virtual meetings)	6	• Many professional service activities moved to virtual formats. This significantly reduced travel and time commitments, making it possible to remain engaged in professional service while managing chair responsibilities. • I made time to continue with engagement in (previous) activities during my chair appointment.
Delegate some activities/ reassign some of your tasks	2	• I had to learn to say "no" as I couldn't accomplish everything. I also delegated within my department as the Deputy Department Head ran many things related to the internal workings of the department while I focused on things up and out of the department.
Work all the time, difficult to do, limit service	9	• No strategy, just get it done. • Limiting service to approximately 4 hours per week or 10% workload.
Value Service	3	• Help the department and Dean understand the impact of professional service so that its participation is valued and understood. • I am a sucker for professional service. I need to start to say no to some service activities.

Table 10 presents a summary of responses to a question about strategies to maintain well-being. The most common approach appears to be stepping away, for example, to exercise, spend time with family, and even pursue hobbies such as gardening. One respondent provided perspective: “*I just try to remember that there are no academic emergencies.*” Other approaches include turning off email alerts, developing support networks, and anticipating or staying ahead of problems. Unfortunately, some responded that they were unsuccessful in supporting their well-being due to lack of time or the challenges of the position, but as the other comments indicated, some efforts might not necessarily involve significant time or mental focus, for example taking mini-breaks.

As shown in Table 11, the skills most chairs rely on include interpersonal skills, communication, and other leadership skills. Some also noted the importance of time management and delegating responsibilities. Two comments indicated the importance of maintaining a service mindset.

Although most respondents are still serving as chair, as shown in Table 1, some who have left the position provided some comments on their strategies to successfully step away from the chair role, as shown in Table 12. Three comments addressed having a succession plan and supporting the new chair, while one intentionally moved offices away from the main department office,

presumably to allow the new chair the opportunity to breathe and lead, as suggested by Cain [19].

Table 9. Summary of responses to the prompt: “Please describe one strategy employed to support your own professional development while serving as chair.”

Category	No. of responses	Selected comment(s)
Shift development time; weekends, summers and breaks	5	• I read more "professional strategy/development" books now (at home in the evenings)
Activities that serve multiple purposes, prioritize meaningful activities, attend conferences and workshops, consulting	30	• Work on conference papers so I could attend conferences and learn. Also, participate in committees (such as ASCE committees) where I would learn about advances in the profession. • Talk to your dean about opportunities for professional development and ask him/her to support you. • Our institution is offering leadership training • I intentionally participated in virtual webinars and workshops • I make sure to sign up for conferences that require me to travel. This takes me away from daily department chair interruptions and gives me time to attend conference sessions and network with other attendees.
Already part of the job	3	• The job itself has led to a lot of professional development. Lots of opportunit[ies] to learn and grow.
Block time	1	
Shift focus	1	• I have focused more on areas related to department initiatives in education and assessment, less on technical areas in my field of expertise in engineering research and professional practice.
Other		• Have an Assistant Chair
Difficult / no time	8	

As shown in Table 13, among those who stepped away from the chair role, five indicated that a leadership renewal was needed or were optimistic about strong candidates who were available to take on the chair role. Nine comments indicated the change was motivated by pursuing other opportunities or focusing on other interests including research.

The survey also asked for advice for other chairs, as shown in Table 14. The majority of comments addressed recognizing the difficulty of the position and working to engage others and celebrating successes. Other frequent comments included prioritizing efforts, as the position a variety of duties and hidden tasks, as noted earlier as one of the surprising aspects of the chair role. Several responses emphasized the importance of time management, communication with students, faculty, staff, and advisory board members, being transparent, and building trust.

Table 10. Summary of responses to the prompt: “Please describe one strategy employed to support your well-being while serving as chair.”

Category	No. of responses	Selected comment(s)
Prioritize, take mini breaks and vacations, family, hobbies	27	● Maintain a routine weekly schedule of going to the gym/ getting physical activity. ● I just try to remember that there are no academic emergencies :) ● I prioritize exercise and meals with my family. ● Take more vacations when school is closed
Turn off email	8	● Turning off automatic email notifications on my phone ● I try to avoid responding to email or working after leaving the office. ● I made every attempt to triage the "emergency" email messages that inevitably came through in the evenings, only responding to truly critical communications after business hours.
Build support, culture	3	● The trust I worked to build early on with the faculty and administration has paid off in that I feel fairly well supported. ● Have opportunities for department social interaction. If your department is a nice place to work, it makes everything better.
Stay ahead of the schedule, on top of issues	3	● Do not let questions linger. Answer them as soon as you can. Otherwise things can snowball. ● Remember that “I will get back to you” is a good [response] when you need to take time to think or get advice about a problem.
Shift effort	4	● Dropping some external work, e.g., stepping down from [Editor] role on journal.
Perspective	1	● Deliberately change your perspective from "mine" to "ours" at whatever level you are an administrator. Feel the joy from the success of the faculty in your department and your support for them.
None, still trying	6	

Table 11. Summary of responses to the question: “What one skill did / do you rely on most to be successful in the role?”

Category	No. of responses	Selected comment(s)
Time management, Delegate	9	I thought I had a pretty good method of keeping track of my obligations, but being chair forced me to be much more intentional about it.
Interpersonal skills, respect, patience, humility, efficiency, willingness to listen	19	- Patience, willingness to listen and find out the real issue before trying to address the problem. - I try to be as transparent as possible. I have become more patient and expect things to take longer. - Prioritizing time to talk and listen to individuals one-on-one in their offices or other neutral meeting places, whenever possible. - Humor, empathy, thinking strategically (sorry -- more than one). Learn to think like the Dean so you can best advocate for your department to the Dean.
Communication	15	- Timely, clear communication. Consistently responding to emails within a day helped maintain trust, reduce uncertainty, and keep issues from escalating. - Keeping notes, which basically served as the agenda for the next week's meeting. - Offline communication to bring everyone (namely, faculty) along. Takes a lot of time but is worth the community that is built and the outcomes for difficult discussions (eg dept strategy and hiring).
Service mindset	2	Keeping firmly in mind that the position is about service to others (students, staff, faculty, alums)
Leadership skills	5	- Collaboration and democratic processes. - Teamwork - faculty and staff are all interested in the Department's success, I don't need to do everything myself - Seeing the big picture
Other	2	- Prayers - I recently read a book by David Allen (Getting Things Done) that was really helpful

Table 12. Summary of responses to the question: “What one strategy did you use to step back from the chair role and responsibilities?”

Category	No. of responses	Selected comment(s)
Succession planning, support	5	- Train my successor. I've also maintained some of the responsibilities (e.g., transfer advising) that I think is a service to the dept. - I chose a new office, deliberately quite removed from the main department office.

Table 13. Summary of responses to the question: “What motivated you to step down from the chair position?”

Category	No. of responses	Selected comment(s)
Leadership renewal needed, Opportunity for others	5	Even if I hadn't retired, I would not have served more than 10 years, as I believe that renewal of leadership is important for any department.
Other position or other interests	9	- Promoted to a different position at the college level. - I am a highly research active faculty member and could not find any sense of balance as chair and continuing with a research group.

Table 14. Summary of responses to the question: “What one or two pieces of advice would you give others about serving as chair?”

Category	No. of responses	Selected comment(s)
Prioritize	11	- You do not have to do everything your previous chair did - focus on what has to be done and then identify one or two new projects that you are passionate about. - Try not to own everyone's problems. - Find the things that are important to you and focus on them.
Mindset	25	- Work to engage all the faculty and build a positive environment - Take care of yourself and don't be too hard on yourself. Try to do your best and that's all you can do. - It is a tough job. Know that. Take your wins and celebrate them and move past the losses.
Transparency, trust	10	Be transparent with faculty and staff. Trust is the currency of leadership and transparency leads to trust.
Ask for help, delegate, find mentors	6	- Find people to get input on your ideas both internally and externally. You can't do the job alone. - Get good help ; let go of control, things done necessarily have to be done your way, as long as they are done adequately.
Time management	4	Expect to be interrupted - your best working time will come early in the day, when nobody else is present.
Communicate with university entities	5	- Despite the increased administration workload, do not isolate yourself. Manage by walking around, talk to faculty and staff, and listen to student leaders (ASCE, Chi Epsilon leadership). - Work closely with your industrial advisory board; make time to meet and get to know IAB members.
Develop leadership skills	5	- Be present. Keep an open door whenever you are able. Be visible at college and university events. Find ways to "yes" when possible. Stay engaged with students. People that you are leading and those you report to will take notice, which builds your reputation and influence. - Set a goal for one or two improvements that you and your colleagues want to make each year and commit yourself to making those happen. You can achieve real transformation with continual incremental improvements.

Summary

The motivation for this project was to seek the perspectives of those who have served as a department chair. The authors intended to build on existing literature that primarily focuses on the chair role from the perspectives of those in higher academic positions such as the dean or provost.

A survey was developed to ask participants to respond to a series of questions reflecting on their experiences and how their role as chair affected their other professional and personal responsibilities. Survey responses were received from chairs at a variety of institution types. Most respondents still serve as chair and have between 1 and 10 years of experience. Respondents reported that an opportunity to serve and leadership development were the most common motivations for assuming the chair role. Respondents reported both satisfaction in their ability to positively impact the people in the department, and respondents were surprised about the amount of small, unexpected tasks that can easily fill a day.

Most respondents decreased their level of teaching, research, and activities that contribute to work-life balance after assuming the chair role. Most increased or maintained their level of professional service and professional development. Comments on how to successfully teach and conduct research as chair focused on scheduling time for the activities, often by staying home or blocking one's calendar, as well as limiting new teaching preps and working with research collaborators to limit the load. One respondent shared a suggestion on how to prioritize work; *"You do not have to do everything your previous chair did - focus on what has to be done and then identify one or two new projects that you are passionate about."*

Combining professional service and professional development with other activities to increase efficiency were common recommendations. In each of the categories, chairs reported difficulty in maintaining quality when faced with the demands of the chair position. Some respondents who had left the chair position cited a desire to tackle other projects (i.e., research or retirement). Several reported that succession planning was key to a successful transition.

Professional skills including interpersonal skills and communication were the most cited skills required for success in the role. Specifically, respondents highlighted the need for developing thick skin in handling feedback, being patient with yourself and others, and keeping organized as key skills necessary for functioning as a chair. These comments address the authors' original intent in taking on this project. A cursory inspection of job advertisements for open chair positions sought effective teachers and researchers, preferably with leadership experience, but rarely explicitly highlighted the skills that chairs find essential, namely, resilience, people skills, and problem solving. Similarly, maintaining a positive mindset was the most frequent piece of advice that respondents wished to pass to those considering becoming chair. The authors are reminded of the expression that all "I really needed to know, I learned in kindergarten."

For those considering taking on the chair position, the incoming chair is encouraged to clearly identify their expectations with the outgoing chair with the dean and the outgoing chair. The outgoing chair can help in the transition, mentor the new chair, and serve the department in different ways in their new role as "past chair". Having mentors and peers within the department and outside the department can help chairs navigate challenges and opportunities, perhaps serving as a constant reminder that they do not have to do everything, and they are not alone. Incoming chairs are especially encouraged to focus on developing effective communication strategies and applying interpersonal skills, areas that were frequently cited in survey responses as advice for serving as chair.

Serving as a department chair provides opportunities for personal and professional growth, but requires significant effort and commitment on the part of the faculty member stepping into the role. Interpersonal skills such as mindset, resilience, and keeping the longer perspective in mind can help the chair serve successfully while also taking care of their own well-being and career development. As one survey respondent commented: *"A department chair role is rewarding. There is so much negative connotation about how the chair's role is thankless, not rewarding, etc. So far, my experience is the complete opposite. I encourage colleagues to step up and serve [in] this important role."*

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APPENDIX A - Leadership transition survey

Introduction

Thank you for your time and assistance in completing this voluntary survey. This survey is intended to get feedback from people who have served, or are serving, as a department or program chair. The survey is intended to take approximately 10-15 minutes to complete.

Our goal is to characterize faculty perceptions and expectations prior to becoming chair, strategies for managing responsibilities while serving as chair, and if applicable, strategies for transitioning out of the chair position. We believe this information will benefit those serving in leadership positions.

You will not directly benefit from participation, but findings may inform engineering educational entities and leadership and the broader engineering community. All responses will be anonymous and once submitted, may not be withdrawn. We will appreciate your response by March 10, 2026.

If you have any questions, please contact Norb Delatte (norb.delatte@okstate.edu), Scott Hamilton (shamilton@ycp.edu), Tanya Kunburger (kunberger@pitt.edu), Audra Morse (anmorse@mtu.edu), David Saftner (dsaftner@d.umn.edu), Camilla Saviz (csaviz@pacific.edu), and Joel Sloan (joel.sloan@afacademy.af.edu).

Are you willing to complete the survey?

- Yes
- No

How long have you served (did you serve) as chair?

- Zero to one year
- Two to four years
- Five to ten years
- More than ten years

Where did you assume the chair position? Please check all that apply.

- At a new institution
- At the same institution
- What motivated you to accept the chair position? Please check all that apply.
- My turn / obligation
- Opportunity to serve the Department
- Leadership opportunity / develop new skills
- Desired breadth of experience at another institution
- Salary increase
- Desired career advancement to upper administration
- Fear of having another (specific individual) serving as chair
- No one else available
- Other

What surprised you most about the chair role? Please include one or two points.

Please describe how the following activities changed after you took over the chair role.

	Significantly more than before	Slightly more than before	Same as before	Less than before	None
Teaching					
Research					
Professional service					
Professional development					
Maintaining a healthy work-life balance					

Please describe one strategy employed to make time to teach effectively while serving as chair.

Please describe one strategy employed to make time to conduct research while serving as chair.

Please describe one strategy employed to make time to participate in professional service activities while serving as chair.

Please describe one strategy employed to make time to support your own professional development while serving as chair.

Please describe one strategy employed to make time to support your well-being while serving as chair.

What one skill did / do you rely on most to be successful in the role?

Have you left the chair position?

If yes:

- What role did you assume?
- Rejoined the faculty
- Moved into a different leadership position (same institution)
- Moved into a different leadership position (new institution)
- Retired
- Other

- What motivated you to step down from the Chair position?
- What one or two pieces of advice would you give others about serving as Chair?

What one or two pieces of advice would you give others about serving as Chair?

Please check all program(s) included in your department.

- Aerospace
- Architectural
- Biological
- Biomedical
- Chemical
- Civil
- Construction
- Electrical
- Engineering/General Engineering
- Engineering Technology
- Environmental
- Geomatics/Surveying
- Industrial
- Manufacturing
- Marine
- Mechanical
- Nuclear
- Physics
- non-engineering (specify)
- other (specify)

How would you classify your College or University?

- Public, 4-year, undergraduate, MS, and Doctoral
- Public, 4-year, undergraduate and MS
- Public, 4-year, primarily undergraduate
- Private, 4-year, undergraduate, MS, and Doctoral
- Private, 4-year, primarily undergraduate and MS
- Private, 4-year, primarily undergraduate
- Public 2-year
- Private 2-year
- Other (please describe)