

# Special Cluster on Gendered Service in Rhetoric and Writing Studies:

## III. Is it Worth it to “Lean In” and Lead? On Being a Woman Department Chair in Rhetoric and Writing Studies<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract:** *This essay will consider the specific challenges and opportunities of the gendered service of being a woman academic department chair. Questions addressing the timing, sacrifices, benefits, opportunities and effects on one's life, both personal and professional, are likely to come to mind for women academics considering whether or not to become department chairs. To engage these questions, I draw on insights from feminist academic labor studies and intersectional higher education scholarship on the roles and challenges faced by women department chairs. I also draw on my own experiences serving a five-year term as a department chair. Through these two sites of inquiry, I analyze how the struggles women department chairs face are connected to specific patterns of feminized labor (Holbrook, Miller, Schell), embodied experience, and service across higher education, what Sharon Bird refers to as “incongruous, gendered bureaucratic structures” (204). I conclude with specific advice and strategies for those considering whether or not to take on the position of department chair.*

**Keywords:** *Department Chair, Gender, Family Formation, Intersectionality, Service, Women leaders*

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1 This set of clustered articles originally started as a CCCC panel presentation addressing the question of gendered service sponsored by the CCCC Committee on the Status of Women in the Profession. My fellow panelists Michelle Payne, Jennifer Heinert, and Cassie Phillips worked via conference calls to bring this cluster of articles into being. I am grateful for their hard work in revising and compiling these pieces, especially in the midst of busy lives academic lives and family duties. Special thanks, too, to the women department chairs that I've had the pleasure of working with or observing over the years. You have inspired me with your example, mentoring, and endurance: Lois Agnew, Alice Gillam, Rebecca Moore Howard, Linda Pratt, Jane Nardin, Michelle Payne, Louise Wetherbee Phelps, and Carol Lipson.

This essay will consider the specific challenges and opportunities of the gendered service of being an academic department chair. While Sheryl Sandberg, author of the bestselling business tome *Lean In: Women, Work, and the Will to Lead* argues that women should embrace and seek out leadership roles in business and other walks of life, there is an inevitable list of questions that such roles raise for women academics who are unlikely to receive the same kinds of financial rewards as their corporate counterparts. Questions addressing the timing, sacrifices, benefits, opportunities and effects on one’s life, both personal and professional, are likely to come to mind for women academics considering whether or not to become department chairs:

- Why should women academics make the sacrifice in energy, time, and scholarly and familial roles to take on a department chair position when the faculty role may be challenging enough as it is?
- When—if ever—is the time “right” in one’s career to take on a department chair position?
- What do department chairs have to negotiate and undergo to become effective leaders? How might those conditions be complicated by specific embodied, intersectional experiences, especially since women faculty members, as Sharon Bird notes, “perform a disproportionate share of academic departments’ care work and emotion labour, and spend more time teaching” while men faculty members, “on average, spend less time in teaching and service activities and more hours in research, and are over-represented among full professors and senior administrators (Bird et al., 2004; Park, 1996)” (Bird 204).
- What difference does this service and leadership make to our academic units and colleges/universities?
- What is gained and lost in serving one’s department and making sure the scholarship and service of one’s colleagues is valued, especially since American colleges and universities, like businesses, are “guided by hegemonic masculine ideals,” by principles that “stipulate the allocation of greater financial rewards for employee efforts that enhance the organization’s financial welfare than for activities that enhance the general welfare of colleagues or clients” (Bird 204)?
- In particular, how can women department chairs be leaders in transforming the labor conditions and structures of service in departments (see Payne, this issue)?

To engage these questions, I draw on insights from feminist academic labor studies and higher education scholarship on the roles and challenges faced by women department chairs. I also draw on my own experiences

erving a five-year term as a department chair. Through these two sites of inquiry, I analyze how the struggles women department chairs may face are connected to specific patterns of gender and feminized labor (Holbrook, Miller, Schell), intersectionality (Crenshaw), and gendered service across higher education, what Sharon Bird refers to as “incongruous, gendered bureaucratic structures” (204). However, as I argue below, focusing solely on studying gender in academic leadership scholarship leaves us with an incomplete picture.

## Intersectional Interrogations of the Role of Women<sup>2</sup> Department Chairs

In *Challenges Facing Female Department Chairs in Contemporary Higher Education: Emerging Research and Opportunities*, Schnackenberg and Simard call for intersectionality to be a focal point for addressing the different material experiences and embodied locations of women department chairs (56). They argue that referring to a “collective we” of women department chairs fails to consider the specificity of varied experiences, locations, power relations, and biases that women chairs may experience (56). In particular, the presumed “we” of department chairs in academic leadership scholarship usually implies that the focus group is white cisgender women, thus failing to account for the embodied experiences of women of color, queer, and transgender department chairs.

Addressing this gap in “How Does It Feel to be a Problem: A Conversation Between Two Black Queer Femme Chairs,” Mel Michelle Lewis and Shannon J. Miller analyze the ways in which their “intersections as Black queer women” shape their understandings of the biases and challenges they face as well as their strategies of mutual support and survivance as they lead their academic departments and navigate their institutions. Lewis and Miller address the

2 For the purposes of this essay and especially since I draw on my own embodied experiences, I use the categories woman or women in this article; however, I am mindful of the ways that these categories fail to account for a spectrum of gender expression and mindful of the ways that academic leadership scholarship must continue to explore contested and complex notions of gender and gender expression. A case in point is the situation faced by Department Chair Richard Crosby, a non-binary and trans faculty member, who was removed from the department chair role (while keeping his faculty role) for reasons that he argued had to do with “bias against him for his gender identity and bias against his research projects that focused on gay sex and HIV prevention and trans women of color” (n.p.). More on the case can be found in the *Blade* article by Chibbarro.

importance of "margin talk" in their lives, the ways in which they speak to their "situatedness" in their academic departments and tell truths about what their leadership experiences entail from their embodied locations (80). "Margin talk" for Lewis and Miller becomes a way of healing, identifying common problems and strategies for survivance, and building solidarity among black women. Lewis and Miller's work is part of a growing body of narratives and scholarship on women of color (WOC) in department chair and academic leadership positions (Davis and Maldonado; Lewis and Miller; Logan and Dudley; Patitu and Hinton). This literature explores how WOC address and meet the challenge of patterns of resistance and response, microaggressions, and challenges to their leadership and authority, as well as ways that institutions can create structures, policies, and networks for diversifying academic leadership.

Even as scholars of higher education leadership have begun to interrogate and complicate the department chair role, it is also important to acknowledge the relative privilege that accompanies such roles in institutional hierarchies. The labor of department chairs is buttressed by the labor of others who make the university work: faculty members, both contingent, non-tenure-track and tenure-track, and also the labor hierarchies that support the work of the academic enterprise, such as cafeteria workers, childcare workers, custodial staff, and support staff (Riedner 123). "[I]ntellectual labor in a university," Rachel Riedner argues, "depends upon the physical and reproductive labor of women and people of color" (123). However, the intersectionality of labor is often not addressed in the scholarship on higher education leadership, even though "this reproductive labor and these reproductive laborers make [universities'] global identifications and influence possible" (125).

Acknowledging these complexities and power relations in our studies of academic leadership and labor are vital, not only for acknowledging differences between embodied locations and experiences, but also for acknowledging how simultaneously privileged and, at the same time, challenging these academic leadership positions are. My own privilege as an able-bodied, cis-gender, white academic woman on the tenure-track at a predominantly white institution (PWI) with a research focus made my passage into a becoming a department chair one that was encouraged and expected by my colleagues and the institution; however, that does not mean the work I performed on a daily basis was without its challenges, losses, and power struggles. The factors that made becoming a department chair challenging for me initially were negotiations around timing, dual academic career couple issues, and family formation issues. These issues inform my analysis of my own experiences around the timing of taking on the department chair role.

## **Becoming Chair: When is the Time Right?**

When I interviewed for an Assistant Professorship position at Syracuse University, a private doctoral granting research university in 1995-6, it was clear that being an administrative leader would be in the cards for me if I were offered the position. The academic unit I was joining was and is an independent Writing Program<sup>3</sup> that split from an English Department in 1986. The current department chair and faculty members on the search committee made it clear that they were searching for an Assistant Professor who, after tenure, could eventually serve as department chair and in other departmental leadership roles.

As someone who had spent two of three years of my first Assistant Professorship as Co-Director of a large Writing Program and who had served as an Assistant WPA in graduate school for two years, I didn't mind the eventuality of becoming a department chair. Although I wasn't sure how administrative duties would fit in timing-wise with starting a family or meeting scholarly requirements at a research-intensive university, I agreed to take on such a role in the distant future. I was offered and took the tenure-track Assistant Professorship, safe in the knowledge that I wouldn't have to be a WPA or department chair until I was tenured.

For the first two years of my faculty position, it was an unaccustomed luxury to be relieved of administrative duties and to just be a faculty member. I basked in the opportunity to focus on my teaching and scholarship. Although I was engaged in various committees and TA training endeavors and increasingly making connections with my colleagues in Women's and Gender Studies, I was not in charge of any major components of the Writing Program. I finished and published my first single-authored book, began co-editing a collection of essays, published several articles, taught a host of new undergraduate and graduate courses, undertook community engagement opportunities, and served on various committees, thus continuing to build my case for tenure.

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3 I will refer to the academic unit I joined as a department throughout this piece even though the status of department was not officially conferred until 2016 as a name change from Writing Program to the Department of Writing Studies, Rhetoric, and Composition. Even though our academic unit was considered to be a program, we met all the criteria for a department from the late 1990s-on. We became a doctoral degree granting program in 1997, began granting a BA in Writing and Rhetoric in 2008, and held our own faculty lines from 1998-on. Many thanks to department chair Lois Agnew for making this name change possible.

At the start of my third year into the job, the Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences called me into his office and asked if I would be willing to consider becoming department chair in a year. Our current chair was leaving to accept a lucrative senior position at another university, and he wanted to fill the leadership gap.

"I'm not tenured," I stammered. "I am willing to be chair down the road, but not until after I have tenure. I have three more years until I even come up for tenure."

"Well, your colleagues tell me you could come up early for tenure in the coming year and potentially be chair right after that," the Dean said, looking at me almost sternly.

I expressed my concern about timing, but I said politely that I was flattered to be considered and that I would confer with my colleagues. I walked away, head reeling. How could I become a department chair at age 34 with three years left on my tenure clock and a commuter relationship? My partner, also an academic, unable to find full-time tenure-track work in the area after coming with me to the university, had recently relocated to Brooklyn, New York to take a tenure-track position, a five hour drive from our home, which meant we could only be together on the weekends. How would the chair position fit in with our plan to commute between our two jobs and have a family in the next few years?

I discussed my concerns over becoming chair on this timetable with my senior colleagues, who understood my situation even as we had a limited number of tenured/tenure-track colleagues who could serve as chair, and some had already held the role or had other responsibilities. The Dean was informed of my concerns, and a senior faculty member, who had already been chair before, agreed to be the interim chair for a year. After that, we hired a new Associate Professor who, agreed to serve as chair for a three-year term, even though the timing of her becoming chair was not in her plans at the time either.

Meanwhile, as I continued on as an Assistant Professor, I pitched in and became Associate Director of Writing for a year, assisting the interim chair with expanding our upper-division writing course offerings and setting up the architecture for a Writing and Rhetoric major and minor. After I completed the Associate Director role, other administrative roles came my way like a ball machine firing in rapid succession: a stint as Director of Graduate Studies from January 2001-January 2005 and, concurrently, a stint as Chair of the Humanities Council 2002-2004.

Once again in 2004, the Dean summoned me to discuss the option of becoming department chair now that I was tenured. At the time of this conversation, my daughter, born in 2002 after I was awarded tenure, was two years old.

The chair timing, once again, seemed off-kilter; there were other senior faculty members willing to be chair, and I was the only tenure-track faculty member in my department with a child under the age of 5; my partner, who had finally managed to land an academic job closer to Syracuse, commuted 75 minutes each way to a nearby college where he was striving to earn tenure. Between a small child and a commuting academic spouse who was untenured, I was hard pressed to see myself taking on a leadership role as time-consuming as department chair.

I declined the role again, but I promised to take on the position after the term of the next chair. I had just “said no” to administrative service again, an oft-used advice tactic that Jennifer Heinert and Cassie Phillips address in their piece in this issue. They point to the ways that women academics are advised to ensure success by saying “no” to service work, with the irony being that service work is vital to the functioning of academic units and the institutional mission of colleges and universities. Even though I said no to the chair role, I became involved in the time-consuming work of the Arts and Sciences Tenure and Promotion committee, serving as Associate Chair and then Chair of the committee. “Say no to one service opportunity only to say yes to another” is likely a more realistic stance for many women academics. As Kerryann O’Meara argues, many women faculty see service as a “communal role and local commitment” rather than an individual choice; not doing service is letting down one’s colleagues or not supporting the organization (15-16).

My turn to become department chair finally came around three years later. My daughter was in her final year of daycare and preschool before starting kindergarten. My partner had earned tenure and was now established in his academic position. I had served in all of the program director roles I could contribute in my unit and served out my term on the College’s Tenure and Promotion Committee; my publication record was solid and would set me up for promotion to Full Professor in due time. More importantly, I felt I had a strong knowledge of the department and the university and was a more experienced faculty member. The Dean and my faculty colleagues concurred that I was the next logical choice to take on the position. This time I said yes to the position, which I held for a five-year term.

The decisions that guided the timing of me becoming Department Chair involved the consideration of family formation and dual career couple issues. I was going through what scholars refer to as the “make or break” period for academics in higher education, which takes place “roughly between the ages of thirty and forty,” the time “when most academics get tenure track jobs and receive tenure. These are also the years when most babies are born” (Mason, Wolfinger, and Goulden 4). As Mary Ann Mason, Nicholas H. Wolfinger, and Marc Goulden argue, the timing of tenure and promotion decisions, the desire

to start a family and have a relationship with a partner affect many women's trajectories within academia. Mason et al's research indicates that

only one in three women who takes a tenure-track university job before having a child ever becomes a mother, and women who obtain tenure are more than twice as likely as their male colleagues to be single twelve years after earning their Ph.D. Women are also much more likely to be divorced than men in similar career circumstances. (3)

As this research acknowledges, women struggle with the timing around reproduction, relationships, and the coinciding of the expectations and demands of tenure. In their article "Academic Mothers: Exploring Disciplinary Perspectives," Lisa Wolf-Wendel and Kelly Ward argue that women academics often face competing messages about whether or not they should have a family (20). Once they decide that they should, they often end up *individually—not institutionally*—negotiating and creating support structures and systems that help them balance their home and work responsibilities (32).

To remedy these labor issues, Wolf-Wendel and Ward call on institutions to "enact policy and practices that do not solely rely on women to make individual choices and career modifications to advance their careers and manage work and family choices on their own" (32). They recommend "policies for pre-tenure professors (both male and female) with family demands (e.g., tenure stop clock policies, lactation support, access to affordable day care, family leave)" (32). In negotiating my own family formation challenges, I was fortunate to be at an institution that had recently created a faculty parental leave policy ("Leave, Faculty Parental"), which allowed me to work part-time at full pay for a semester after my daughter was born. As I made use of the university's family leave policy, senior colleagues affiliated with the Department of Women's and Gender Studies reminded me that they had worked tirelessly to advocate for a family leave policy on our campus. They also reminded me of the material conditions of their lives as academic parents who had had to return to work shortly after giving birth without time off for their own recovery and infant care responsibilities. One colleague even described how she was still bleeding from giving birth a few weeks prior, and yet she still had to teach anyway in order to maintain her professorship. Stories such as these were a reminder that the architecture for institutional change had been built on the backs of earlier generations of women faculty members who had had to gut it out on their own even as they advocated for a better future for junior colleagues like me.

Even with the protections of a family leave policy and part-time work for the first seven months of my daughter's life, I often struggled, as most working

parents do, with balancing the demands of caring for an infant and attending to my career and administrative responsibilities. In the first three years of my daughter's life, I directed my department's doctoral program and did not have any family around other than my partner to help with childcare responsibilities. As is the case for many academics, my extended family lives far away, on the other side of the country. While my mother visited to help me for a few weeks when my daughter was born and made annual trips to visit for the Thanksgiving holiday, she could not afford to visit more frequently.

With little familial support and a series of infrequently hired babysitters, I took my daughter to work when she was an infant, toting her to faculty meetings and into the graduate program office as I met with students. I worked from home in conference calls when I could, and graduate students came to my home, as needed, to meet with me while my daughter napped or played nearby. My colleagues were supportive, but administering a graduate program with an infant in tow was often a challenge. Although I felt torn about it, I enrolled my daughter in part-time daycare when she was 7 ½ months old so I could better balance my administrative and pedagogical duties.

Recognizing that family formation and a myriad of other factors affect academic trajectories, the Academic Affairs Committee of the University Senate at my institution, chaired by one of our Writing colleagues, worked on a tenure clock flexibility proposal that passed our University Senate in 2008. The policy spelled out that the tenure clock could be stopped if "a request for parental, maternity, family medical, military or disability leave, disrupt[ed] one or more semesters of work during the probationary period" ("Tenure Clock Flexibility," n.p.). In addition, the clock could be stopped for "fulfillment of extraordinary institutional service, such as teaching abroad or serving in an administrative position during the probationary period, where these circumstances interrupt or substantially slow progress toward tenure." ("Tenure Clock Flexibility" n.p.). This policy allowed for a flexible response to the finite nature of the tenure clock and the material conditions of individual faculty members' lives. Such policies as these are, as Lisa Wolf-Wendel and Kelly Ward note, a vital part of ensuring that academic institutions respond, collectively rather than individually, to the needs of a diverse array of faculty members rather than leaving those faculty members to negotiate these challenges on their own (32).

## Implementing the Role and Labor of Being a Department Chair

*You're doing WHAT?*

*Why would you want to do THAT?*

*You'll derail your scholarship!*

*Haven't you already suffered enough as a WPA?*

These were some of the questions and comments I received when I told colleagues across the country that I had accepted the position of department chair. These questions and comments are not surprising when one considers the rhetoric surrounding the chair role. The chair's job is often referred to as the "hardest" job in higher education or the "last worst job," as a fellow chair said to me once. As Linda Hanson argues, in "Herding Cats: Feminist Practices and Challenges in Chairing an English Department," the department chair role is an "equivocal" one; the "chair inhabits a pivotal space at the bottom of a hierarchical chain of command with a business model and at the forefront of a collegial model of governance" (184). The chair is often

placed in a position of meeting differing, sometimes contradictory expectations of administrators and colleagues, a position that fosters a perhaps desirable ambivalence in straddling both administrative and academic expectations. The chair has responsibilities conferred on him or her, but often and certainly at my institution lacks authority to act unilaterally to meet those responsibilities. (184)

As the University Provost at my institution once said to an assembled group of department chairs at our annual retreat, "you have the harder job, and you make my job possible." While the department chair job is billed as a notoriously difficult and often thankless position, it is a job that has often **not** been occupied by women. As Carol Mullen argues in her article "Challenges and Breakthroughs of Female Department Chairs Across Disciplines in Higher Education," "while women have advanced in leadership positions, progress has been slow; their representation in such *masculine-typed* elite jobs as department chair is modest at best and, in prestigious research universities, rare" (5). The situation of appointing women to department chair positions is uncommon enough that universities still send out press releases to higher education publications to celebrate the fact that they have appointed one or more women department chairs.

As I looked around the table at my fellow chairs at our monthly college-wide chair's meeting, I saw Mullen's claim in action. Most department chairs in the room were white men over the age of 50. A handful of us were women, and an even smaller group were women or men of color. I was also 5-10 years younger than most department chairs around the table, and one of the few chairs to have a young child at home and a commuting academic spouse. Over my five-year term, the number of women chairs around the table increased, and we often talked with and supported one another, forming an informal network of hall conversations, emails, and phone calls as needed.

Fortunately for me, the anomaly of being one of the only women chairs around the table did not apply to my department's leadership history. My academic unit had been directed and founded by Dr. Louise Wetherbee Phelps (see Phelps "Becoming a Warrior"), and two other women, Dr. Rebecca Moore Howard and Dr. Carol Lipson, had served in the chair role prior to me. These former chairs offered valuable advice during my time in the office. Also, I was able to turn to my colleague who was Director of Undergraduate Studies (Lois Agnew) for advice and daily support as well as supportive staff members in my unit. This network of women colleagues made a big difference in my ability to get work done and feel supported. Even with this support, I had many questions about how to understand the labor and priorities of the department chair position. I turned to the scholarship on writing program administration for ideas, but I found that most scholarly explorations of WPA work did not encompass the scope and scale of the duties I was facing in managing a large academic department.

Like most academics, I went to the one place where I had always gone to find answers—the library. Returning home with a large stack of books with scintillating chapter titles like *Managing the Academic Department* and *Surviving your Days as Chair*, I noticed that these guidebooks were written in a tone that swung from grimness to cheerful optimism. Chapters in these books dealt with an array of topics, from strategic planning to handling the day-to-day duties to the delicate topic of managing difficult colleagues or recalcitrant deans or provosts. These books indicated that department chairs are expected to fulfill often polarized roles: serving as effective advocates, defenders of the department, and also as nurturing and supportive colleagues. Often department chairs are constructed as masculinist "commanders in chief," expected to embrace a traditional model of gendered authority, speech, and a defensive or "strong" posture toward deans and higher administrators.

While I picked up useful general strategies from these books, I also felt a growing sense of dissatisfaction with the stock portraits of the imagined department chairs offered in their pages. Many of these guide books implied that the department chair was a straight white man, a **Chairman** who could already assume well-established authority; a **Chairman** with suitable physical stature and command to take over; a **Chairman** with a deep and booming voice. As I read these guidebooks, I remembered what a former chair from another department had once said to me: "A department chair must be someone **who can talk down to the Dean,**" a masculinist dominance-based model to be sure.

In contrast to this dominance model, the department chair is also expected to be a "manager" and a "housekeeper" who takes care of departmental details and manages personalities and work flow. Most department chairs face

expectations to assume these dual roles, but women and people of color in particular, bear additional freight around the caretaking and emotional labor they have already been asked to undertake from their embodied locations as faculty members. In addition, women faculty members experience the family formation issues I mentioned earlier and face a wage gap, earning "less than men, on average, at each faculty rank and at all types of institutions" (Curtis 4), and are underrepresented 2 to 1 at the highest rank of Full Professor (Curtis 2). Moreover, gendered climate issues persist on campuses; women have their authority, competence, and knowledge questioned more than men counterparts, especially if they are women of color (Harris, and González 3). Sexual harassment and gendered climate issues also make institutional environments a challenge as well. These factors were seldom mentioned in the chair guidebooks I consulted. Over time, I found my way to the interdisciplinary scholarship on intersectionality and department leadership that informs my perspective now, but those first few years as department chair were a study in trial and error and searching for answers.<sup>4</sup>

## **Chair as Collaborator**

In the midst of figuring out how to proceed as chair, I saw that it was important for me to develop a leadership style that would encompass my embodied location, my political sensibilities as a feminist, and my administrative capabilities and strengths, keeping in mind some of the barriers I might face as a woman leader and as a feminist. One of the strengths I brought to the job was that I had been in charge of programs before becoming chair: co-directing a writing program at a large state university before coming to Syracuse (Schell "Who's the Boss") and a mid-sized graduate program, as mentioned earlier. I had accumulated a history of committee service, leadership, and activism, both inside and outside the department and in the community, and I enjoyed working collaboratively with my colleagues. Going into the chair position, I was determined to proactively create structures and opportunities for the department and not just react to internal crises and external challenges.

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4 A key feature in Mullen's study of 121 female Department Chairs is that the role of Department Chair is often one that no one wants. Even as many of the women in Mullen's study were incredibly accomplished and qualified to assume their roles as Chairs, they noted that taking the job was "a politically expedient decision, as in "We have a rotating chair and nobody really wants the position. It was my turn and I'm relatively sane," and "It's a hard job that no one else wanted" (11).

While Chair, I worked with faculty, fellow administrators and staff of the Writing Program to build new initiatives and opportunities:

- to hire new faculty members and to work to promote three senior women colleagues to the rank of Full Professor;
- to work with the Director of Graduate Studies to revise and update the doctoral program curriculum and undergo an external review;
- to revise and update the second writing course in the lower-division writing sequence with the Director of Undergraduate Studies and a team of instructors and TAs;
- to actively build and implement, with the Director of Undergraduate Studies and our faculty and staff, an undergraduate writing major;
- to create a Distinction Program for undergraduates working on thesis projects;
- to make arguments to the Dean to correct salary inequities that were in place for women faculty members;
- to redesign department processes to be in compliance with a union contract as part-time faculty in our unit and across the university unionized;
- to found a community writing group for veterans with a colleague;
- to work with our Assistant Director for Writing Technologies to sponsor a summer "Tech Camp" to encourage learning and experimentation in digital writing pedagogies;
- and also to establish a Nonfiction Reading Series that enhanced our signature undergraduate offerings in creative nonfiction among other work.

Of this list of specific endeavors, one of my favorite projects was to collaborate with the Assistant Director for Writing Technologies to create the aforementioned summer technology camp or "Tech Camp" for teachers of all ranks. This week-long summer workshop, which we ran for three years, became a space for faculty, staff, and graduate students to experiment with digital pedagogies, take risks, and revamp their assignments and syllabi in a fun and supportive atmosphere that encouraged dialogue and sharing of information.

All of these initiatives were about building structures and curricular opportunities, and they were central to advancing the department with my colleagues and also to sustaining an intellectual and curricular community. To say there were only productive components of my time as chair, though, would be disingenuous. There were also many failures and challenges that happened, including initiatives or opportunities that I and my colleagues had to drop or

could not pursue due to lack of time or support; disputes with the college administration over a seminar writing course that was set up against our unit's wishes and staffed by post-docs; a failed search; disputes over priorities and funding; conflicts both internal and external that would be too numerous and detailed to unpack in these pages.

### **Mentorship and Advocacy**

One constant in the chair position was the work of mentoring and supporting colleagues. In my role as chair, I spent hours writing proposals to the Dean and negotiating for the resources to support the research and special endeavors of faculty members, including their participation in national leadership roles and funding requests. I also spent many hours with colleagues hiring faculty and writing faculty reviews, from annual reviews to third year reviews and tenure and promotion reviews as well as supporting and putting forward three promotion cases for women faculty members in the span of two years. With a backlog of senior women faculty members who had not yet been promoted to the rank of Full Professor, I saw these promotions as one of my highest priorities, especially given the dearth of women full professors at research institutions. I also visited and wrote reviews of the classes of part-time faculty colleagues, moments that I relished as it allowed me to see how the curriculum was being enacted.

### **Assigning Service**

Another key component of my work as department chair was channeling the labor and work flow of the department: assigning faculty members to committees, charging committees with specific tasks, undertaking curricular reform and new initiatives, and responding to problems, mandates, and opportunities. I saw my role as chair as not only creating opportunities for new initiatives but also as someone responsible for the "engine" of service: how curricular work and departmental goals were to be met through channeling the work of one's colleagues and staff. This work, of course, requires judgment, skills and a sense of timing. The chair must determine who is best equipped to undertake this work and must consider how this service work fits into balancing workloads across rank and positions as well as how this service will be rewarded and recognized (see Payne, this issue).

### **Building Relationships and Community**

In addition to assigning service, it was also part of my daily labor to build relationships and community, work that falls under the category of emotional labor as Payne describes it in this article cluster. This relationship and community building often involved significant outlays of my time and energy, but

were among my most favorite and challenging duties as chair: hosting receptions to mark key occasions, acknowledging and celebrating awards and achievements, taking colleagues out for lunch or coffee to hear about their work, processing losses, disagreements, and disappointments, and being responsive to challenges and life events that my colleagues across ranks were dealing with—whether illness, grief and loss, divorce/separation, childbirth, or other matters. Moments like these required empathy as well as the ability to direct colleagues to university resources that they might need for support. Moments like these were opportunities to lead through presence and through understanding.

## Scope and Scale

What was different about being chair than the other roles I had held as graduate director or WPA, though, was the scope and scale of the job—the sheer volume of work and the fact that the work touched on **all areas** of the department and the lives of every single faculty member, whether tenure-track or non-tenure-track, staff member, or TA. In a given day, I might meet with and resolve problems and concerns connected to a TA, a staff member, a faculty member, and receive a call or email from an angry parent or a frustrated faculty member from another unit. I might meet with the Dean to ask for specific resources or be engaged in meeting mandates for reports or assessment required by the college or the university.

The scope was all-encompassing, and the job never turned off; I was always on duty, day or night. I could go to bed at midnight, wake up at 6:00 a.m. and find anywhere from three to five “urgent” and pressing emails and requests waiting for time sensitive responses from various individuals. Often, I found that I would gear up to respond to and take action on a “crisis-oriented” email only to find that within 24 hours, the person or persons who had written the email had cooled down and rethought the initial response and that the situation had dissipated or been transformed. While I would be ready to respond to the initial emotions and situation that led to the “crisis,” the situation had often changed, leaving me with a dramatically different terrain to navigate. I learned to slow down the process of email interaction, asking for face-to-face appointments and moving the charged interaction off email as soon as possible. I learned to define what a “crisis” really was and to respond in appropriate and ethical proportion to the perceptions and emotions of others, part of the work of “emotion management” and emotional labor addressed in Payne’s piece in this issue. As Chair, though, it is tempting to assume the role of first responder, to see one’s role as “putting out fires” and “staving off threats.” At the same time, taking on that role and mindset can turn being a departmental leader into being a crisis manager who is reactive rather than proactive.

## **The Second and Third Shift**

Even with a supportive staff and colleagues to assist me in the day-to-day work of department chair duties, I found that addressing the needs and emotions of those in my academic unit was immediate, pressing, and often overwhelming and exhausting. The emotional and situational labor of managing department affairs didn't go away once I went home at night. After putting in a full day at the university most days until 5:00 or 5:30 p.m., I picked up my daughter from her after school program, picked up the dog from dog daycare, and went home for my second shift of cooking dinner, doing dishes, and helping my daughter with her homework and bedtime rituals. My partner also had his own second shift of engaging in household chores and errands after teaching all day and commuting for over two hours. In the evening, I often thought of other chairs I knew who had stay-at-home spouses or spouses who worked part-time who shouldered most of the domestic duties.

After my daughter went to sleep at night, I started my third shift of the day, logging into my institutional email to do more work, prepare reports, write back to colleagues and students, read and grade student work, and prepare assignments as well as prepare for the next administrative work day. My family complained about my non-stop schedule, and they were disappointed that I was, in their words, "always working." I tried to explain what the job entailed, and they tried to understand, but they could not fully empathize with my situation. They wanted my time; they wanted my attention, and my job was interfering with their lives, happiness, and connection with me because I brought the department chair work home every night. Two years into the job, my daughter began sentences with "*When you're not chair, we can. . .*" Clearly, the impact of the position was registered in my daughter's life and in her mindset.

## **Sustainability versus Work-Life Balance**

In the midst of juggling chair work and domestic labor, self-care became an increasing struggle. I gained weight, suffered from bouts of insomnia, got sick more often, and struggled to find time to exercise as much as I wanted to. An annual physical exam revealed that I had borderline high cholesterol, which woke me up to the fact that I was stretching my body beyond capacity and not attending enough to my eating and exercise habits. I started scheduling time in the gym during my lunch hour; I changed my diet to include healthier options and more regular meal-times in the course of the work day. I also started talking to a counselor to deal with some of the anger and frustration that I started to feel about having so little time to myself, whether at work or home. My work-life balance was out of whack, but, as I came to realize, it was

not just a question of balance, but one of how to have a **sustainable** schedule and life.

Researchers Athena Perrakis and Cynthia Martinez argue that instead of speaking of work-life balance, which implies that an individual can simply be a better manager of time and “do more with less, function on less sleep with fewer resources, and sacrifice their own well-being in pursuit of excellence both at home and in the workplace” (216) we should seek in faculty and leadership roles the concept of sustainability:

Perhaps, though, in focusing on balance and thereby implying that there is in fact a way to have it all and achieve excellence across all aspects of life regardless of the sacrifices entailed along the way, we have overlooked one very significant reality: Anyone can do anything for short periods of time. What matters in the long run is how sustainable our life and work practices are. To maximize our potential and be fully present in all aspects of our lives we must be physically, psychologically, emotionally, and spiritually intact. The notion of sustainability invites consideration of our total wellness as working women and challenges our ability to maintain a standard of living and working that benefits all the many stakeholders in our lives without forcing us to sacrifice our own well-being in the process. (216)

Perrakis and Martinez’s concept of sustainability, as opposed to the concept of “work-life balance,” helped me revise my thinking about how to engage a sustainable pace as chair and work toward realistic goals that would not deplete my family or me.

In my quest to create more sustainable structures for being chair, I began to work very hard at staying connected to my scholarship. I collaborated on two co-edited collections while chair, which allowed me to have intellectual partners and be in regular contact with scholars in my areas of expertise. Thus, I sought to avoid the isolation and sense of loss that many chairs face when administrative work overwhelms their scholarship and intellectual lives.

Attending conferences to present papers and giving invited lectures also became a lifeline for me to other scholars and an unaccustomed luxury and pleasure, a chance to get outside the bubble of my own administrative world. Prior to becoming department chair, I found the pressure of presenting papers at conferences stressful; now it seemed like a luxury to have a flight and a hotel room to myself and a few days ahead where nothing but attending and listening to panels or presenting my own work was on the agenda (save the times I received desperate emails from staff or faculty or phone calls from higher-level administrators demanding a response and my nightly calls home to check-in on my family). Thinking about sustainable work structures pushed

me to create space for my intellectual work through collaborative writing projects and conference attendance.

## **Life After Being Chair: Sorting through the Meaning of it All**

"I'm glad you're not chair anymore, Mom, because you won't be on your computer all the time. You can take me to the craft store without telling me to wait for 10 minutes and then 30 minutes and then two hours before we can go." —Autumn Kerr, age 10, my daughter, giving an impassioned speech at my chair retirement party in front of the Dean and assembled colleagues.

After five years of being department chair, I felt that I had accomplished what I had set out to do and that the department needed fresh leadership and perspective. With the faculty and Dean's approval, I was able to hand off the chair responsibilities to an accomplished and effective colleague. I was granted a hard-won, year-long research leave directly following the completion of my five-year term. During that leave, I wrote several chapters of a new book and articles, went for long runs and hikes with my dog, and spent more time with my family and friends. I also began thinking through my past and future career trajectory. What had my time as Chair meant? Was it worth it? Would I recommend the role to others considering it? Should I go into higher-level leadership roles? I cast around for answers to those questions over the next few years as I went back to teaching full-time and took on a variety of service responsibilities within the department and college. I also turned down two leadership roles in higher education administration that I was offered since neither appealed to me and since my home duties were still pressing. I still felt exhausted. I often joked that I was in "recovery" as chair and that there was no way I was ever going back into administrative work.

In 2015, three years after leaving the chair position, I was scheduled to present on a panel on feminist leadership of writing programs at the Conference on College Composition and Communication. I struggled to figure out what I wanted to say that would be legible and transferrable to others about my time as chair. As I finalized my remarks, I surprised myself by writing and speaking forcefully about the need for feminist colleagues to take on leadership roles, to equip and prepare for them, and to ask for the resources they need to be successful. I realized that I had been transformed through the experience of being chair, and that I felt that feminists should seek out or at least strongly consider leadership roles in higher education.

In the question and answer session for the feminist leadership panel I gave at CCCC, panel attendees had questions about what they needed to negotiate

to become effective leaders, wanting to know how to handle questions around the timing of becoming chair, finding mentorship, gaining resources, implementing program and curricular change, developing a leadership style, and solving crises. By way of a conclusion, I offer some general advice and lessons of survivance from the job that, while incomplete, may help those considering whether or not to pursue the chair role and what they need to do as they prepare for it.

**Mentoring and Professional Development**<sup>5</sup>: Being chair can be a lonely enterprise, especially if you are one of the few women chairs and WOC chairs in your college/university. It is imperative to seek professional development, training, mentoring, networking, and solidarity opportunities while chair. In addition to whatever might be available at a given institution or in the region for academic leadership mentoring and development, there are opportunities to attend national workshops for department chairs, such as the Association of Departments of English (ADE) summer workshop for new chairs or the Women's and Gender Studies Director or Chair workshops within the National Women Studies Association. At the same time, women department chairs can create informal networks across institutions at professional conferences, seeking out and finding peers among national colleagues and support for their intellectual and programmatic work.

Miller and Lewis's dialogue piece, mentioned at the beginning of this article, demonstrates the kinds of dialogue and support that can happen based on shared experience and struggles, especially for those in minority positions. As they point out, there are gaps in existing chair networks, especially when those networks are set up for mainly white women (80). Dr. Monica Cox, a Professor and Chair of the Department of Engineering Education at The Ohio State University, one of three black women department chairs at the entire institution, founded a network for Women of Color in Department Chair Roles in the fall of 2018. The goal of the network is to "provide real-time confidential support for women with similar experiences," and to address biased responses, assumptions, and microaggressions that women of color chairs often experience (Rogers). As Cox notes, "There are so many women who are one and onlys. Few people may understand your specific troubles. People are

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5 Of "the 50,000 chairs in America, one in five turn over every year, and while it takes 10,000 hours of practice to reach competence [the equivalent of about eight years of service]. . . only 3% of Chairs receive training in leadership" (Gmelch qtd in Payne).

just lonely and isolated and there's a hunger for it" (qtd in Rogers, n.p.). Such networks are significant for support, survival and for gathering strength to proceed in often challenging institutional and departmental settings.

### **Compensation**

Anyone taking on a chair position should consider the vital role that compensation and release time from teaching or other duties can play in incentivizing the job and also making sure that one's service is noticed and institutionally rewarded (see Payne). The women chairs in Mullen's study indicate that "Department Chairs" face "an enormous workload and a low -to moderate pay-off" (12). Thus, it is important for new chairs to negotiate financial resources for themselves and for their units as they consider the position. Compensation is also important as a safeguard against the disadvantage of losing time for one's scholarship and teaching and closing the wage gap that exists for women and people of color in higher education. Without adequate compensation or release time as part of the chair position, *saying no* to the position may be the best answer.

Coming in to my first term as chair, following in the footsteps of the preceding chair, who was a skilled resource negotiator, I was able to make the case for a sizeable discretionary fund as well as a 1-0 teaching load so I could manage the job. My administrative salary was 1/9 of my total salary on top of my load, so I was well compensated for my labor as chair. These resources positioned me for success during my first term as chair. While my second term as chair did not bring the same level of resources due to a new Dean offering lessened discretionary funds, I had a strong start with my first term and was able to build on what I had already achieved.

### **Building Transformative Opportunities**

According to Caroll and Wolverton, 80% of university decisions are made at the department level (qtd in Payne n.p.). A chairship brings visibility and opportunities for advocacy, for carrying out a progressive feminist agenda such as improving working conditions for non-tenure-track colleagues; hiring, mentoring, tenuring and promoting women and people of color; revising curricula and courses to be more diverse and more inclusive; creating family friendly policies and inclusive policies. These are parts of the job that align well with feminist values even as other parts of the job may be more of a challenge.

### **Developing a Sustainable Work Plan**

Having a well-articulated strategic work plan for one's chairship that ties into or builds on a department's yearly goals or long-term plan is vital. Such a plan needs to be negotiated with colleagues, with one's Dean, and also with

trusted mentors and advisors. Having time in the work week to return to that plan and assess what has been done to make progress on its implementation is important. Creating structures that encourage collaboration and communication across administrative positions is important as well, whether in the form of strategic Executive Committee meetings, faculty meetings, task force or working group meetings. My department had a well-established structure of staff and directors' meetings as well as faculty meetings and standing committees where updating and communicating about priorities and projects was part of the regular functioning of the department. When time for such meetings is limited or impossible or agendas are already packed, surveys and calls for feedback and input on department matters on listservs or open office hours can be used to encourage and solicit feedback and dialogue, especially in larger units where it is not possible to visit all department members' office hours and talk in person.

### **Building Community and Communication**

The chair's role is not only about getting work done; it's about being present: listening, and communicating and honoring the achievements, ideas, and needs of one's colleagues. Creating structures and rituals for interaction and exchange, listening (even in the midst of disagreements and frustrations), and recognition are an important part of the chair position. Lunches, coffee dates, open houses, retreats, happy hours, annual holiday parties are important ways to come together and socialize across an academic department. Likewise, announcing achievements in a department newsletter, on a listserv, or on social media are important ways to recognize one's colleagues. The chair attending award ceremonies, readings, and events honoring colleagues is equally important; there is no substitute for simply being there to support and witness these moments.

### **Addressing Family Friendly Policies and Wellness**

While many universities are designing and implementing family friendly and wellness centered policies and practices, such policies often have loopholes and gaps that fail to account for the specific material conditions and lives of university employees across embodied locations, rank, and position. For instance, I worked with staff and colleagues in my department to address the fact that the university at the time had no official maternity leave policy for graduate students, leaving such provisions up to an individual department. Working with a supportive set of staff members, I worked to provide accommodations for graduate student parents, nursing mothers, and those facing elder care situations.

When I was chair, I also made it clear to colleagues that I had family duties and understood what it meant to juggle academic work and family along with my own self-care. I brought my young daughter to work frequently, especially on her sick days since our University day care center didn't accommodate sick kids and sent them home to be cared for by working parents (a problem for many of us in the department and across the university). Other colleagues and graduate students saw me with my child on campus and told me they felt safe to bring their children in to work when necessary or talk to me about support for their care labor situations.

I also made a point of being public about including work-outs in my work day, especially after receiving a diagnosis, part-time way through my time as chair, of high cholesterol and knowing my family history of heart disease (a father who died at age 53 of heart attack). In my chair's office, I changed into my gym clothes at noon and went to work out in the campus gym or went running near campus. Some of my colleagues and TAs told me that it was inspiring to see me working out in the midst of my work day and that they were inspired to work out, too. I also founded an online exercise social media group called "Take the 100 or 1,000/1,200 mile Challenge" on facebook with the goal of spurring on the pursuit of health and wellness among colleagues and encouraging others to do so at other institutions in the midst of often sedentary academic lives.

Even as I was able to work toward perpetuating feminist values as a laborator and community builder in my own unit, my stint on the Women's Concerns Committee of the University Senate and also my time chairing the CCCC Committee on the Status of Women in the Profession, which coincided with my time as department chair, helped me see the larger scope of the work of fighting inequities on campus and in the field. These committees gave me the opportunity to work on projects combatting inequities and exclusions even while recognizing limitations and constraints within the structures at hand.

## **Conclusion: The Answer is Yes**

From the vantage point of six and a half years of distance on the Chair position now, my answer to the question is "It Worth it to Lean in to Lead?" is still **yes**. Yes, it is worth it, or, at least it was for me, and yes, it was costly and time-consuming and often a fraught and unpredictable ride to be Department Chair. As the old cowboy saying goes: "If you climb in the saddle, be ready for the ride." My hope is that more feminists in rhetoric and writing studies will lead our academic departments—whether English Departments or independent writing programs or units—and that when we attend chairs' meetings at our colleges and universities, we will look around the table and see a more diverse and inclusive cast of institutional leaders who also said **yes**. At a time

when universities are mired in neoliberal economic models and where we daily witness academic labor practices that run counter to feminist and progressive ideals and against a national backdrop of xenophobia, racism, sexism, and transphobia, among other issues, such leadership is needed now more than ever.

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