"No Man Is an Island" … Except for Department Chairs

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In his 1624 poem "No Man Is an Island," John Donne pontificates on the interconnectedness of humankind, calling for empathy and humanity: "No man is an island / entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, / a part of the main." The communities we build as postsecondary educators are powerful: We create support networks, inspire new ideas, and uncover synergies to achieve more than what we could as individuals. However, department chairs seem to be an exception. The nature of the role can create many forms of isolation, ultimately harming their health and wellness.

Views from seventeen department chairs were collected as part of a research study in 2019 to learn about their leadership development experiences when first entering their roles. Although many spoke highly and positively of their journeys, the significant personal and professional costs of the position were resounding. In general, these academic leaders mentioned facing heavy workloads, high levels of responsibility, and demanding schedules, especially since most had multiple additional roles as practicing clinicians, researchers, and teachers. They noted working long hours and not having enough time for self-care. For many, resting on evenings and weekends was a luxury they could not often afford. As a result, these leaders reported feelings of isolation arising from their professional identity, their relationships, and themselves.

Isolation from Professional Identity

The role of department chair was seen as a temporary step away from one's core professional identity as a clinician, researcher, and/or teacher rather than as a permanent step toward academic administration. The added workload of the chair role took time and capacity away from their other commitments, resulting in lower research productivity or compromising their professional practice. The trade-off was often made unwillingly. Many chairs described taking the chair role as "sacrificing" their true academic passion.

The chairs who shared their experiences as part of the study believed their peers viewed them as outside influences, no longer part of the team. This newly felt isolation contributed to a perceived loss of humanity, making them seem more like a cog in the system than a person, colleague, and friend. They described the role as a lightning rod for addressing complaints, noting that they were rarely approached with positive feedback, which further strained relationships. For example, in cases where the best course of action for a department conflicted with a faculty member's self-interests, the resulting disappointment was projected directly to the chair, who acted as a mediator and absorber of negative feelings. Alternatively, faculty members expected chairs to problem-solve for them when, in reality, they often had no authority or control over the matter. These situations resulted in feelings of helplessness, both to address the issue and to manage unfair expectations.

Isolation from Personal Relationships

All department chairs noted sacrificing personal relationships to meet the demands of the leadership position. They spoke about the limited time and energy they had available to spend with friends and family and their inability to be fully present, which negatively impacted the quality of their experiences. Some chairs noted that the pressures of the position had led to a desire to retreat alone—seeking to recharge—rather than mustering up the energy to engage in social activities.

Spousal relationships were highlighted in particular. Many noted that having a supportive spouse was foundational to navigating the demands of the position. However, the role was heavily straining these relationships, in some cases potentially leading to divorce.
Old friendships with colleagues were described as new potential minefields. In addition to the limited time they had available for informal socializing, they noted that the nature of the relationships had changed. Chairs said that it would now be inappropriate for them to vent, particularly about departmental matters.

Isolation from the Self

Isolation from the self was a prevalent theme during the conversations with chairs. The accumulated emotional and mental exhaustion from the role created energy deficits and ongoing difficulties in meeting basic physiological needs, including exercise or sleep, adopting convenient but unhealthy eating patterns, and consuming alcohol for the purposes of self-numbing. Several chairs expressed a sense of loss from giving up cherished personal hobbies. Female faculty, in particular, spoke of a desire to engage in personal reflection and contemplate self-actualization. Still, they did not have the time or the mental presence to do so due to their family responsibilities. One of these chairs shared, "I have an hour or two of downtime and then I'm in bed. If I don't do that, the whole house of cards falls apart."

What Do We Do?

Thankfully, it's not all doom and gloom. All the department chairs felt tremendous pride in the opportunity to make a larger impact on their institution, particularly by mentoring early-career faculty. To prevent the personal costs from scaring faculty away from these positions, there are some practical considerations for institutions to consider.

Mental health and wellness. If department chairs receive the main message—whether direct or implied—to meet mandates and make tough decisions, they will continue to feel the pressure to achieve it at all costs. As a first step, institutions may acknowledge the challenges chairs face and prioritize their wellness and mental health. From there, tangible individualized supports can be put in place.

Peer mentoring. Creating communities of practice specifically for department chairs may increase feelings of support and connection. Receiving validation from others who are

successfully overcoming similar challenges and sharing ideas can make chairs feel less alone. For this, institutions could prioritize formally and proactively supporting these communities' development.

Share the load. Heavy workloads and limited capacity were identified as the root problems resulting in feelings of isolation. As such, the ability to delegate administrative responsibilities to other department faculty members by creating assistant, associate, or deputy chair roles could bring about much-needed relief. The benefits would include more manageable workloads for chairs while creating a sustainable leadership pipeline for the institution.

Conclusion

Department chairs can feel like islands, isolated from their original professional identities, their meaningful personal relationships, and their own sense of self. Ultimately, Donne's poem laments that this isolation weakens the community more broadly. Awareness is the first step to setting academic institutions on a course to improve the experiences of faculty in these roles while increasing institutional leadership capacity and sustainable pipelines for the position.