Commentary

How to Be a Department Chair of Epidemiology: A Survival Guide

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As former chairs of 3 of the largest departments of epidemiology in the country, the authors provide “lessons learned” on how to be an epidemiology chair. To start, they suggest discussing strategic visioning with faculty, staff, and students; evaluating existing operational and governance structures; setting a predictable style; and considering which traditions to keep and which to modernize. Next, the authors consider key administrative issues. Recruitment and retention of the best faculty and students are critical to a successful department’s future. A great department requires a great vision. To manage the change a new vision creates, the chair must attain buy-in and proceed with persistence. Chairs must promote the interests of the department to higher administration, a job best accomplished by being a team player and picking your battles. Keeping an eye on the mission involves balancing quality education with research and always striving to improve public health. Finally, a chair must continuously assess whether he or she is doing the best job. Eventually, the chair must know when to quit and how to quit well. Although being chair is demanding and sometimes difficult, it is a position that can be rewarding to both the individual and the department.

In academia, whether at schools of public health or in other venues, few department chairs of epidemiology have formal training in management. Typically, previous successes with research and, to a lesser degree, teaching are considered sufficient job experience to administer a department. Yet, academic administration is a far cry from conducting and administering research. Thus, in this article, 2 former chairs of 2 of the largest and most established epidemiology departments in the country share reflections on what we learned about administering our departments. We provide these reflections to offer some “lessons learned” and to start a discussion on the roles of epidemiology chairs, a topic that, to our knowledge, has never been addressed in our field and rarely in other academic disciplines (1).

GETTING STARTED

Departments of epidemiology focus on teaching, research, and service. Administration is somewhat “simpler” than for many other academic health science center departments in that clinical administration is not involved. On the other hand, the need to maintain constant funding for a group of faculty is a modern-day “myth of Sisyphus”—push one faculty member up the mountain and another rolls down. The decision to become a department chair is not trivial. Taking on a chairmanship is generally feared to bring an end to a research-focused career while presenting challenges regarding personnel management. A chairmanship does, indeed, involve responsibility for faculty and staff development, but the role also allows for creative opportunities around setting educational directions and interacting with other departments and broader institutional administrative entities (2–4).

The job has its own life cycle, beginning with an initial attempt to grasp the strengths and weaknesses of the department and ending with the decision that it is time to move aside for the next chair. Starting is perhaps the most challenging point in the life course of a chair. Expectations of the institution and of the department’s faculty, students, and staff are inevitably high, and mentoring for the chair is likely to be informal and, if available, found among existing, experienced chairs.

We suggest some general ways to get started. First, be visible and meet faculty, staff, and students; second, meet with all faculty members individually or in small groups.
using an agenda that covers not only their status and plans but also their views of the department’s strengths, needs, and priorities; and third, initiate strategic planning to engage faculty, students, and staff in setting the course for the department. The new chair should also evaluate the operational and governance structure of the department and consider whether it is appropriate and functioning. Are the key aspects of the department’s mission covered, and are there sufficient pathways for input to the chair? The new chair will also need to set a style: accessible? open door policy? formal or informal?

Established departments often have traditions. We both served as chairs of well-established departments, both led previously by chairs with remarkable longevity, and we faced the challenge of how to maintain the best of those traditions while setting aside traditions needing change. The chair from “outside” may have an advantage in making change. As chair at Johns Hopkins University, one of us (J. M. S.) would initiate discussions of change with, “I know that this goes back to Wade Hampton Frost, but . . . .” The results of well-done strategic planning can be a useful lever for making change, particularly if consensus was reached on the need for change.

IT’S ALL ABOUT INTELLECTUAL CAPITAL: RECRUITMENT AND RETENTION OF FACULTY

Building a top department means recruiting and retaining excellent scientists. Typically, this means attracting and keeping faculty who have made, or have the potential to make, important contributions, as evidenced by publications in top-tier journals and by grants. Our comments below focus on recruitment, but they pertain just as much to retention. In both cases, the game is won by finding a candidate whose interests fit with those of your institution and then attracting that person with attentiveness and respect. Recruiting is like dating. In epidemiology, it is like being in a single-sex school and finding a heterosexual date; the pool of epidemiology talent likely to get and maintain scarce federal funding is limited and the demand sometimes great (dependent upon the funding climate). So, competition can be fierce.

Ultimately, it comes down to whether the partners can get passionate about each other, but the process is as important as the content. The process involves paying attention to all of the little details that make the candidate feel wanted. Communication that is frequent and attentive is key. Any and all concerns must be taken seriously, and even concerns that are not expressed must be anticipated. Moreover, remember that you are typically recruiting a family and not just a person, so winning over the spouse or significant other and even the children is part of the courtship.

Your appeal to the candidate comes from your individual offer: a compelling package of compensation and resources speaks volumes about your ability to ensure the candidate’s success. But your appeal also comes from your environment. Schools with a good reputation have a head start. There really is something in a name: prestige spills over from the whole institution to the department independent of how good the department really is. At the same time, candidates can see greatness even when it is not part of a well-known brand. One way to strengthen your hand is to build from strength, with strength defined broadly. Leverage your established good relationships with colleagues throughout the institution and, if relevant, at partner institutions. If you can make the case that this recruit’s world is their oyster because of all the established collaborative opportunities, you are well on your way.

Of course, you may not want to attract all comers. Two questions to consider after finding an impressive resume are 1) Is this person a good fit for your department? and 2) Will the person be a reasonable team player? Some of the most painful experiences in a chairmanship involve passing over a superstar (or superstar in the making) because his or her personality is a concern. Even worse is hiring a superstar who does not play well with others. With respect to fit, issues to consider are whether there are others with whom the recruit can collaborate. It’s risky to recruit a junior person who is an “N of 1,” that is, has no evident mentors or collaborators. Nonetheless, sometimes a department must broaden (i.e., build to overcome weakness). Our recommendation in this case is to recruit programmatically; for example, find a more senior person who can bring or build a group.

Much of what we have just said about recruiting the best faculty is also germane to recruiting the best students. The best students attract the best faculty, and the best faculty attracts the best students. This may be why health science centers tend to have the same rankings over prolonged periods of time. Yet, leveraging lucrative financial packages, attentive overtures, and broad-based mentorship can win talented students to your department.

IT’S ALL ABOUT INTELLECTUAL CAPITAL 2: CAREER TRAJECTORIES OF JUNIOR FACULTY

Another way to build a top department is to “grow your own” excellent faculty. This process is slower, albeit less expensive. Internal and external recruitment are yin and yang in that, together, they provide balance. Internal candidates are well known to you and thus are potentially less risky. They offer value and stability, particularly if they have demonstrated a track record of federal funding. On the other hand, they sometimes do not bring completely new ideas and approaches given that they have been acculturated into your environment. Nonetheless, they are generally a part of any growth strategy. To produce a stream of well-trained pre- and postdoctoral mentoring. So, building a great training environment has benefits not only in terms of keeping existing faculty happy and attracting external faculty and students but also in terms of growing the faculty.

The success and retention of faculty are facilitated by mentoring. Indeed, independent of rank, new faculty members need mentoring. Mentoring has elements of parenting, and chairing is like being the patron of a large clan, that is, ensuring that everyone has a competent parent. Mentors give seasoned advice, open up opportunities, and provide support. In our current era of big science, it is increasingly
difficult for junior faculty to find a niche, and a committed mentor may need to push hard to find for their mentee a place at the table. Indeed, in general, a mentor’s role is not only to vet the science but also to impart the strategy (some call it art) of achieving success in academia. For instance, balancing research, teaching, and service, with the balance changing with funding success, can and should be taught by a mentor. At the chair level, reasonable strategies to balance, even if they vary, should be considered as long as they allow for reasonable overall functioning of the unit.

Mentoring is of such critical importance that it should be formally handled. Faculty should have a clearly designated mentor, best identified during the recruitment process. Beyond having a single mentor, a mentoring committee might be appointed, particularly for faculty who are not yet tenured or at the professorial rank. Having a committee assures a variety of points of view and provides a way to avoid potential conflicts of interest on the part of the primary mentor.

Chairs can and should also be mentors, especially to more senior faculty who often have no advocate. At this level, mentorship means advancing reputation. Examples include nominating faculty for awards, suggesting them for prestigious committees, and listening to and promoting their ideas, including with departmental funding. The chair also has the sometimes difficult task of guiding faculty at the end of their careers, helping them to evaluate alternative trajectories as their research careers end and to consider exit strategies.

**THE INSIDE GAME: PRIORITIZATION, DELEGATION, COMMUNICATION**

Building an ever-better department requires a plan. Many jokes have been made about the “vision thing,” but, indeed, plans represent a vision. The vision sets priorities and actions. A vision must be appropriate to person, time, and place—it must match the circumstances. Too grand a vision will not fly; too narrow a vision will not take you far enough. Cost should rarely fully constrain the vision since good ideas “sell”; yet, an overly ambitious vision will not pass the laugh test. Your own expertise and interests can ground a vision, but only if it is institutionally synchronous, that is, it advances, rather than distracts from, the department’s strengths. If you center major departmental resources on your own focus and that focus is not broadly applicable, you will generate resentment. If, however, your focus has or can gain wide acceptance as an avenue for achievement by others, your talents may be central to the unit’s success.

Whatever your vision, it requires getting buy-in (and even better, an embrace) from key constituents. Culture change cannot be accomplished by one person. It takes the “conversion” of persons who have the trust and respect of the faculty. Once these persons become change agents, the majority of the others will follow. Be prepared, however, for the possibility that a minority may never be won over, even to ideas that most have subsequently adopted. The trick with that minority is to make sure they do not scuttle the effort or distract you from the commitment. Although a vision will not come to fruition if you are the only booster, ultimately, a department is not a democracy. Good or bad, you call the shots.

Change requires an enormous amount of communication and a great deal of persistence. Classically, although change is often meant to and does improve productivity, in the short term, productivity actually falls. Thus, a chair must push through the acute difficulties. A good way to do so is to outline interim steps and interim benchmarks and then to constantly check them as metrics of moving in the right direction.

A plan also requires action. As a chair, you are a busy person; to implement, you must delegate. The best chairs surround themselves with people smarter than themselves, direct those people to march behind with gusto, and never look over their shoulder. Perhaps the most important delegation of all is to the departmental administrator. This person knows the budget and all the institutional rules and regulations better than you ever will. The departmental administrator knows who to call when the bathroom floods and when a student is “detained” in a foreign country for smuggling her pet cat onto a plane. Without this person, you are sunk, so if the administrator is good (as he or she must be), bribe with chocolates—regularly.

**THE OUTSIDE GAME: PROMOTING THE INTERESTS OF THE DEPARTMENT TO THE SCHOOL AND HIGHER ADMINISTRATION**

Chairs are middle managers. As chair, you represent the interests of both your dean and your faculty. This means that you must decide, on the basis of your priorities and those of your administration, when to be a bulldog for your department regarding issues of resources and respect and when to be an advocate for your dean and school. Our advice is to pick your battles carefully. In the end, your department will be better off if you are viewed as a team player and a friend to your bosses. If your loyalty is unquestioned, then, when you have a special need, you are more likely to be able to negotiate to get it. Even then, know that not all battles will be won. You can only make the best possible case, find allies, and be persistent. Inability to obtain all the resources you need or want is not a personal mark of failure.

Whenever possible, position yourself and your unit to end up in a win-win situation, wherein what your institution wants is what benefits you. For example, the university is building a new school of health information sciences, which means fewer resources for you and others at your school. However, you are able to negotiate that the new school will focus on public health informatics, and, with these colleagues right next door, your faculty will be able to garner innovative grants. By the way, you may also be able to negotiate for additional space in the new building; consider all the benefits of getting a real estate license (or at least learning the difference between gross and net square footage).

**BALANCING QUALITY EDUCATION WITH RESEARCH**

Education is a unifying element of the mission of a department of epidemiology, spanning all faculty, regardless
of their particular area of research emphasis. Excellence in education cannot be maintained without ongoing evaluation and maintenance. In research-driven departments, there is inevitably a potential for conflict between the research and educational missions, a conflict needing ongoing management by the chair. Education may be viewed as secondary, and incoming junior faculty typically negotiate for “protected time”—that is, no or minimal commitment to teaching for some number of years. The “best” researchers are often the “best” teachers and advisors, and they are at risk of being overloaded.

The chair needs to show that quality education is a priority and to assure that faculty “buy in” to this view. How can this be done, particularly in the face of the ongoing need to obtain research funding? First, the chair should participate in teaching the department’s courses and in advising students, serving as a visible role model. At Johns Hopkins University, by long-standing tradition, the department chair has taken a lead role in teaching introductory courses. Leon Gordis, for example, taught “Epi 1” for 3 decades and authored a leading text based on this experience. At the University of Texas, R. B. N. has built a novel curriculum around teaching innovative thinking skills, providing tools for students and a model for faculty. Second, new faculty should be guided and mentored as they begin to teach courses. Third, the quality of the department’s training should be evaluated in an ongoing fashion by an appropriately constituted departmental committee and the chair. Feedback on teaching and advising should be part of each faculty member’s annual evaluation.

**HOW TO DO A JOB THAT NO ONE IS PAYING YOU TO DO**

We write from the perspective of having been chairs of departments in private institutions, lacking “hard-money” funding to support the core administrative functions of the department and even the substantial amounts of time that we spent on being chair. The funds available to support the administrative functions of the departments were a varying mixture of returned indirect costs and tuition revenues, the leavings after “taxation” at higher administrative levels, and modest endowment funding. This funding picture meant careful compromise and balancing the need to “pay” for the effort involved in being chair against other uses of available funds, particularly recruiting junior faculty.

As committed researchers and educators, we took the “triple threat” approach, adding our administrative efforts to teaching and research commitments that matched those of most faculty members. This approach lengthens the work week and erodes “personal time,” but it can be made to work through planning and efficiency. That said, we and others functioned as though we held 2 positions—that of chair and that of researcher and educator. Whether this model is truly sustainable and transferrable is a question we still ask ourselves (5).

Given the inevitable “infinite work queue” that follows from the joint roles of administrator, educator, and researcher, how can the chair get the job done? Beyond a willingness to work lengthy hours, assembling a support team is key. The chair needs sufficient staff to provide a buffer against moment-to-moment demands and to track the many issues typically in play. For the larger department, a leadership team of deputy chairs or division chiefs is also needed to distribute the burden of management and mentoring, to assist in representing the department within the school and beyond, and to provide counsel to the chair.

**HOW DO YOU KNOW IF YOU ARE DOING A GOOD JOB?**

Inevitably, after some years in the job, an introspective chair will question whether her or his functioning continues to be in the best interest of the department. The answer to the question comes from diverse inputs that range from sensing the mood on a day-to-day basis to more formal evaluations, such as those of the dean or of formal, periodic academic reviews. Inevitably, the day-to-day work queue brings problems, and the chair may be left to question whether there is progress. Moreover, knowing that an outside candidate may bring new ideas and garner a cache of resources, the chair must balance an argument for stability against an argument for change.

**KEEPING YOUR EYE ON THE MISSION: IMPROVING PUBLIC HEALTH**

Epidemiologic research is carried out with the ultimate objective of producing evidence of benefit to advancing the health of the public. Yet, departments of epidemiology have the immediate goals of carrying out fundable research and providing domain-specific training in epidemiology. Translation of epidemiologic evidence is more distal from these goals, but it needs to be embraced by the department and kept at all times at eye level. The chair should set the tone on translation and support service activities among faculty and students related to advancing health.

**KNOWING WHEN TO QUIT AND QUITTING WELL**

We are both former chairs as we write this paper: R. B. N. after 6 years and J. M. S. after 14 years. How long should a chair hold this position? This unanswerable question should be considered in the context of the life cycle of a department chair. The first years are marked by the challenges of getting started, setting the department’s course, and recruiting new faculty in line with strategic directions. The middle years call for sustaining momentum, addressing gaps in expertise, and continuing to enhance education. The transition to the last years comes when the once-new chair’s mandate and goals have been accomplished. A cycle of change and transformation lasts at least 10 years, although progress should be evident within the first 5 years. Typically, on taking a chair position, at least a 5-year commitment is anticipated.

One evident point in time for thinking about moving on is at the completion of the original strategic goals. By then, invigorated leadership and new directions may be
warranted. Perhaps, some may want to commit to continuing to guide the evolution of their departments, but they need to be certain that they have the enthusiasm and innovative ideas needed to go on. Otherwise, they risk being regarded as chairs who stayed on too long. In considering whether to continue, a chair needs to be introspective and self-questioning while also seeking insights from others. Expectations of the dean may be helpful: is there a mandate for further change? resources for development? consistency of the dean’s expectations with the goals of the chair? In the end, the decision to stay on involves the subjective weighting of personal and external considerations in an intrinsically individualistic algorithm.

A decision to quit, once made, needs thoughtful implementation. For the short-term, faculty, staff, and students need to learn of the decision and a plan has to be made for leadership transition. The period after a decision to step down is announced is potentially difficult; the departing chair no longer holds authority, and an interim chair, if appointed, is not fully empowered. The former chair needs to be supportive and to yield authority. We both left for new positions and consequently did not need to consider strategies for the longer term, had we remained in our departments. A return to “just being a faculty member” poses challenges around the former chair’s role in the department. We both followed strong and long-standing chairs who graciously provided guidance to us while staying in the background. Indeed, at Pennsylvania’s University of Pittsburgh, Lew Kuller had been chair for 30 years and had built the department from a tiny handful of stalwarts to one of the premier programs in the country. Yet, he stepped back into the faculty, behaving with respect and supporting the decisions of his successor (and mentee). Such a model can only be the hope of a new chair and the aspiration of a former chair.

CONCLUSION

We have seen many colleagues with the potential for leadership (particularly women) eschew the role of chair for fear of doing an inadequate job. Although being chair is demanding and sometimes painful, ultimately it is a job that a competent person can learn. Moreover, the chair position can be tremendously gratifying. The best rewards come from successes of the faculty, particularly the maturation of recruited junior faculty and recruitment of better and better students. The gratification increases with time in the position until, ultimately, the chair finds herself or himself viewing the labors of his or her work and vision and seeing that they are good.

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