Maintaining a Research Profile While Chairing

Laurie McMillan and Kevin J. H. Dettmar

Laurie McMillan is associate professor in the Department of English at Marywood University. Kevin J. H. Dettmar is W. M. Keck Professor in the Department of English at Pomona College.

AT THE Pittsburgh ADE Summer Seminar (2013), a roomful of department chairs moved from honest venting to practical advice to moments of inspiration.[1] The topic? Keeping up with research while chairing. The result? This articulation of crowd-sourced wisdom meant to validate typical struggles, outline smart strategies, and reenergize readers. In short, we hope our experiences will help other chairs gain a clearer sense of why they might want to continue with their research and how they might do so successfully.[2]

Why Maintain a Research Profile?

The truth is, not all chairs need or want to continue their scholarly work, so these remarks are not prescriptive. Still, a 1992 study found that 78.11% of chairs surveyed believe it is important for chairs to "remain current within [the] academic discipline"; additional priorities include "maintain[ing] research program and associated professional activities" (70.45%) and "obtain[ing] resources for personal research" (54.18%) (Carroll and Gmelch 5). More than twenty years later, it seems likely that scholarly work has become an even higher priority, the reasons ranging from the personal to the professional. Perhaps the most compelling reason to continue with scholarship is that our research interests and expertise are what landed us in academic departments in the first place. And attending to our research passions can have positive results beyond our own gratification.

For one, scholarly accomplishment helps us maintain status and credibility with administrators, allowing us to advocate more effectively for our departments. Similarly, continuing scholarly work helps us act as role models and mentors who can empathize with colleagues struggling with their own research goals. Furthermore, research informs and revitalizes our teaching and may lend itself to collaborative work with students. We may also benefit from staying active in the field as we embark on curricular reform, undertake program development, recruit faculty colleagues, or become involved in other administrative projects. In short, maintaining a research profile can be viewed as contributing to rather than competing with our administrative and teaching responsibilities.

In addition, it is important that administrative work become associated with growth and leadership, not with sacrifice. Chairs who subsequently move to a new institution or a dean's position will benefit from a consistent record of publishing. Chairs who return to faculty status benefit from having maintained research momentum in the field.

What Are Common Obstacles?

Recalling benefits of scholarly work may energize us, but recognizing obstacles can validate our experiences and help us strategize effectively. The struggles chairs face

CrossRef DOI 10.1632/ade.154.72

in maintaining a research agenda differ more in intensity than in kind from those encountered by their faculty colleagues. The most typical challenges are rooted in issues of time, energy, and self-sabotage.

It is much more difficult for chairs to plan research time the way they might have done as faculty members. On a daily basis, they typically perform a large number of brief tasks on a variety of issues, moving quickly from one focus to another, with few opportunities to block out large chunks of time (Gmelch and Miskin 131). New administrators may be particularly overwhelmed because of the learning curve. Chairs are also likely to receive outside service requests, both on campus and from other institutions; typically, those in leadership roles tend to be asked to do more. The time spent on administrative tasks can consume energy, and an exhausted brain is not likely to be productive. Exhaustion often coincides with a disruption of work-life balance as well. As we mentor and respond to others' needs, we may not be receiving the mentorship and support we need to nurture our own intellectual development.

Finally, chairs may sometimes end up exacerbating the very obstacles that make research more difficult. If the desire to bring tasks to completion is a priority, chairs may shy away from longer-horizon projects. Chairing can even be used as an excuse to avoid research productivity: "I'd hoped to have that book finished by now but, you know, I've been chairing my department . . . [insert eye roll here]." However, once we understand that the challenges are real, not a result of excuse making or our imaginations, we can move forward more productively and reflectively.

What Strategies or Tactics Can Help?

While no magic recipe exists to expand time, eliminate stressors, or strike amazing balances in our lives, there is hope. By using smart strategies that address the obstacles that chairs face, petitioning for resources that can offer support, and developing healthier habits and attitudes, they can indeed maintain research profiles.

Some of the most important strategies involve protecting blocks of time for scholarly work. Summer is helpful but generally not enough. If chairs are given course release, the time that would have been devoted to teaching can be explicitly reallocated for scholarly work. Chairs may also need to say no to requests even more than they did as full-time faculty members, and they should make a habit of frequently delegating any "task that someone else can do" (Lucas 255). Because administrative work easily expands to fill available time, creative time should be scheduled ahead of administrative time without guilt. After all, administrative work involves deadlines that ensure its completion. Our commitment to research can be communicated in ways that "enlist the dean, the department secretary, and faculty members in the cause," defining research time as an appropriate departmental expectation (254).

Managing e-mail more effectively can streamline administrative work. Answering an e-mail message in person may resolve an issue at one go instead of having to participate in a long e-mail chain. Some chairs have e-mail blackout periods or use programs that block or track time spent online; for some, simply turning off the ubiquitous "ding" of the new message arriving is enough to keep e-mail in its place. Too often, e-mail controls chairs instead of their using e-mail to work efficiently.

Learning to prioritize and manage the inbox can help them avoid information overflow, and clear guidance is readily available in publications such as Mark Hurst's *Bit Literacy* (2007).

Some chairs change the nature of their research because of the difficulty of finding uninterrupted blocks of time. This change may involve setting "small, achievable goals" and finding ways to be productive in "sporadic chunks of 15 to 30 minutes" (Phelps), or it may involve taking on smaller or incremental projects. Publication may be limited to book reviews, journalistic pieces, or concise essays, although conference papers could build gradually to a longer project. Some chairs turn their lens to what Ernest Boyer calls "the scholarship of administration." Some may feel renewed enthusiasm for research through collaboration. Whether writing together or meeting as a research group, participants are likely to stay motivated and accountable to one another.

When chairs need to feel reenergized to get scholarly work done, a number of strategies can help. One is finding a protected space in which to pursue it. Some chairs simply close their office door to focus on research, while others work from home or in a setting that is not associated with either administrative or personal responsibilities. Chairs can also maintain energy through professional and personal support systems. Colleagues, family, and friends can encourage a healthy work-life balance and provide breaks from administrative duties.

Even when we have found effective ways to manage our time and energy, we might find ourselves stalled—in some cases using our chair responsibilities as an excuse for turning away from our research agendas. The advice commonly offered about writing and procrastination, such as writing regularly and at a time of the day when our energy level is high—often the start of each day—may help here (Hauptman 116). We each need to analyze our own situations in order to determine what is holding us back from our research and what might help us move forward.

What Resources Might Chairs Seek?

While we can manage some of these strategies on our own, others will work best (or work only) if there is external support in place to help us manage our time, energy, and well-being. Release time, sabbaticals, administrative leave, days working from home, summers away, and other blocks of nonadministrative time can help tremendously. Writing retreats seem to be especially effective in motivating participants (Moore), and money can be set aside for this activity as well as for other kinds of professional development, research, and travel—such as annual attendance at the ADE Summer Seminars. Research assistants and grants can also be helpful supports, so we need to advocate for such resources for ourselves as well as for our faculty colleagues.

Finally, chairs can invest some personal resources, using part of the extra salary they may garner from their administrative work. This extra salary can be used to secure a gym membership, periodic massage sessions, or housekeeping services. Being physically, emotionally, and mentally healthy will enable them to handle better the combination of administrative responsibilities, teaching, and research.

How Can Chairs Avoid Self-Defeat?

Research expectations can vary greatly according to the particular faculty member and the context. Meeting with the dean to establish research goals can help us develop appropriate expectations. But we must also articulate our research agendas on the basis of personal and professional aspirations. We must not let a dean discourage us just so that we'll have more time available for administrative tasks. That's a recipe for ending a term as chair with the feeling that our scholarly gifts have been squandered—sacrificed to administrative exigencies.

No matter what answers we reach regarding our research goals, we will have more peace with our work if we learn to value our administrative accomplishments as well. Too often, we have a tape in our head telling us that administration is "the dark side." Instead let us find role models who continue to develop both their administrative and scholarly gifts, and let us acknowledge that those gifts are not always mutually exclusive. It is also helpful for us to make note of the changes we have effected through our administrative work, changes that were the result of collaborative and institutional development rather than individual accomplishments.

Finally, institutions should recognize administrative work in promotion decisions so that chairs will be supported (Logue; Council of Writing Program Administrators; MLA Commission on Professional Service). And whether or not institutional policies support them, chairs should believe other people, including students, when they say that the chair is doing a great job.

Notes

1. Kevin J. H. Dettmar led the session, and Laurie McMillan was one of the participants.

2. The term *chair* in our text should be understood as not only applying to chairs but also standing in for other faculty members with significant, formal departmental administrative responsibilities. Similarly, to avoid clumsiness we refer to a chair's "scholarship" and "scholarly work," but of course not all English department chairs are literary studies or writing studies scholars. Please know that we intend as well to recognize the professional work of creative writing faculty members.

Works Cited

Boyer, Ernest L. *Scholarship Reconsidered: Priorities of the Professoriate*. Princeton: Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, 1990. Print.

Carroll, James B., and Walter H. Gmelch. "The Relationship of Department Chair Roles to Importance of Chair Duties." *Association for the Study of Higher Education Annual Meeting*. 29 Oct. 1992, Minneapolis, MN. 1–18. *ERIC*. Web. 28 June 2013.

Council of Writing Program Administrators. "Evaluating the Intellectual Work of Writing Program Administration." *Council of Writing Program Administrators*. Council of Writing Program Administrators, n.d. Web. 28 June 2013.

Gmelch, Walter H., and Val D. Miskin. *Chairing an Academic Department*. Thousand Oaks: Sage, 1995. Print.

Hauptman, Robert. "How to Be a Successful Scholar: Publish Efficiently." *Journal of Scholarly Publishing* 36.2 (2005): 115–19. *MLA International Bibliography*. Web. 28 June 2013.

Hurst, Mark. *Bit Literacy*. New York City: Good Experience, 2007. Kindle e-book.

Logue, Alexandra W. "The Scholarship of Administration." *Inside Higher Ed*. Inside Higher Ed, 2 Feb. 2009. Web. 28 June 2013.

Lucas, Ann F. *Strengthening Departmental Leadership: A Team-Building Guide for Chairs in Colleges and Universities.* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1994. Print.

MLA Commission on Professional Service. "Making Faculty Work Visible: Reinterpreting Professional Service, Teaching, and Research in the Fields of Language and Literature." *Profession* (1996): 161–216. *Modern Language Association*. MLA, n.d. Web. 28 June 2013.

Moore, Sarah. "Writers' Retreats for Academics: Exploring and Increasing the Motivation to Write." *Journal of Further and Higher Education* 27.3 (2003): 333–42. *MLA International Bibliography*. Web. 28 June 2013.

Phelps, Hollis. "Doing Research at a Teaching-Focused College." *Inside Higher Ed*. Inside Higher Ed, 13 Sept. 2013. Web. 22 Sept. 2013.