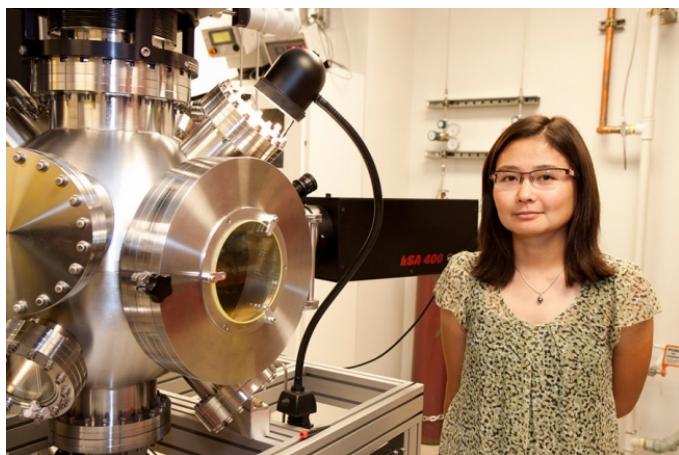


THE CHRONICLE of Higher Education

ADVICE

Career Options After Tenure

The path from professor to department chair seems obvious, but exactly how you make that transition is seldom so



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By Jamie K. Belinne, Brigitte Dauwalder, William S. Epling, Jamison V. Kovach, and Fatima Merchant | MARCH 23, 2016

After earning tenure, most new associate professors continue down the path of research, teaching, and service. Faculty mentoring tends to focus on "what comes next" for junior scholars, not for those in midcareer, so any academics interested in venturing into administration are largely left to find their own way.

With support from a National Science Foundation grant, the University of Houston put the five of us together as a committee to look specifically at advancing academic careers for women after tenure, particularly in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics, or STEM fields. What we learned was that the barriers facing women in attaining leadership positions were challenges faced by most midcareer faculty — regardless of gender or discipline.

Career paths in academe are often undefined. The path from faculty member to department chair may seem obvious, but, in fact, exactly how you make that transition is seldom so. Universities generally do not have professional-development programs aimed at preparing midcareer faculty for future leadership roles, and administrative job openings are frequently not well advertised.

As a result, some faculty do not know how to position themselves to be chair or to take on other leadership roles. And other faculty members simply don't think of themselves as chair material, so they never even consider it as a career option. Our goal was to develop tools to: (a) guide academics considering leadership roles, and (b) plant a seed in the minds of those who weren't so that they might at least make a conscientious choice about whether to pursue a leadership position. We also sought to develop resources for administrators and mentors to encourage aspiring leaders.

As a first step, we wanted to learn more about the chair's role and career path. So we surveyed current and former department heads (both inside and outside the University of Houston) as well as faculty who have served on search committees to hire a department chair. We found two key barriers that keep midcareer faculty from pursuing a chair's position: a poor understanding of what the role requires and a lack of encouragement to consider the career path.

Our team's next step was to define the skills necessary to take on administrative roles. Based on survey responses from department chairs and search-committee members, we identified the following core competencies as the most critical to success for department chairs:

- **Qualifications:** You must be known as a respected researcher/scholar, a good instructor, and an effective participant in service activities.
- **Interpersonal and communication skills:** You are able to work with anyone and everyone — that is, you are a good listener, empathetic, collaborative, and diplomatic.
- **Leadership skills:** You are able to develop a vision for the department's future by thinking strategically, planning for that future, and effectively managing people to transform your vision into reality.
- **Organizational skills:** You must be able to manage time, details, energy, and meetings well.
- **Conflict resolution and negotiation skills:** You know how to bridge disagreements, and can advocate on behalf of the interests that you represent as chair.

- **Financial management skills:** You understand financial issues, such as developing and following budgets, managing resources, and seeking grants.
- **Motivation to serve:** Your desire for a leadership role is not just selfish. You want to help others.

We used concepts and quotes directly from survey responses to define and provide specific examples of what each of those competencies mean within the context of the chair's position. Faculty could then use those examples to see if their skills and experience mesh well with the role, or what expertise they may need to develop.

Of course identifying the competencies was only the beginning — then candidates need to know *how* to develop the necessary skills. Many universities have on-campus resources for training, but they are not always well advertised or focused on faculty needs. It may also be important for some faculty to find off-campus training for certain skills. Identifying and supporting access to such programs should be a high priority for institutions looking for new leaders.

Our survey results also shed light on the second barrier — that midcareer professors receive little encouragement to consider administrative roles. We found that many women, as well as faculty in general, did not actively pursue a department chair position because no one had ever suggested they should. The obvious solution: Deans and/or current department heads should use performance and tenure reviews to encourage midcareer faculty to consider an administrative path.

To that end, we developed a new resource to guide midcareer faculty and open up discussions about the skills required for a leadership position. It incorporates the competencies, as well as suggested professional-development programs, and we are now using it at the University of Houston. Readers can obtain a copy [here](#). It contains the following elements that could be easily customized for your own institution:

- Competencies for department chairs (including examples and definitions).
- Advice on how to develop skills and experience organized by competency.
- Tips for administrators on how to discuss the administrative career path with midcareer faculty.

We suggest this tool be used not only during performance reviews of faculty members, but also as a resource to mentor would-be department chairs — or even current ones seeking to boost their skills. (For more guidance regarding how this tool can be used, click [here](#).)

Possibly the best approach to training and development is a program through which interested faculty work on projects, under the guidance of a mentor, that help them develop specific leadership skills. The tools we've designed offer a structured way to create that sort of mentoring relationship.

We've performed some initial tests through meetings between department chairs and newly tenured faculty in the STEM disciplines at our university, and the response has been extremely positive. Department chairs say the tool makes it easy to structure discussions about advancement opportunities, and acknowledge that those discussions were not happening on a consistent basis in the past. An interesting side benefit: Our efforts have made faculty and department chairs more aware of existing resources for professional development.

Across academe, there is agreement that we need to encourage and develop a diverse group of leaders, particularly in the STEM disciplines. We hope this simple resource we've designed can be of use to other institutions interested in the professional development of their future leaders.

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Overcoming Post-Tenure Paralysis

By Kerry Ann Rockquemore

It's not uncommon for midcareer faculty members to feel stuck. But you've got so many options! The trick is just finding the path that's right for you.

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