THE DUTIES OF A DEPARTMENT CHAIRMAN:
LETTER TO MY SUCCESSOR

By William O. Aydelotte

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Dear __________,

I promised, at your request, to put down on paper a few notes of things that it might be helpful for you to know about the job of department chairman. Though most of what follows will probably come as no surprise to you, I am glad to try to summarize the main elements of the situation as I see them.

As you know, we have tried for the last twelve years to maintain a department of a caliber which in some respects has been beyond the University's ability to support. Though I have found the administration in general willing and anxious to foster improvement, this goodwill can compensate only in part for the disabilities intrinsic in the situation. Our financial limitations have been a substantial handicap, though they have recently become less marked.

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1. This document is what it purports to be. It is not cast in the form of a letter to my successor as a literary device but is, with minor changes, the letter I actually wrote to my successor when I retired from the chairmanship of a history department in 1959 after twelve years of service in that position. I have added one or two passages to make clear to others what would have been taken for granted inside the department, and I have deleted a couple of references to local circumstances which might seem unkind to readers who knew these circumstances and would be unintelligible to readers who did not. Otherwise, the letter stands as it was originally written.
The limitations on our library resources are also important, though the library is quite strong in some fields, and our vigorous acquisition policies in these last years have helped. On these points and others, however, while we have improved, other institutions have more than kept pace, and consequently our bargaining position is still not as strong as we would like it to be. The fact that our department has lost men to some of the most distinguished universities in the country, testifies both to our care in selection and also to the limitations of our competitive position.

The deficiencies of the university have to be made up, in large part, out of the life-blood of the chairman. The maintenance of a program of this kind in somewhat unpromising circumstances is possible only through a continuing series of tours de force. The chairman's job, at least that part of it which relates to selecting and keeping personnel, is principally one of pulling rabbits out of a hat. It takes constant pressure, activity, thought, and imagination to keep things going at this level. This involves a good deal of brooding and worrying. There is all the difference in the world between doing the job well and doing it in a perfunctory fashion; the former of course takes far more time and effort. When an important decision has to be made, you should turn it around in all possible ways in your mind, stay awake at night thinking about it, discuss all aspects of it with your colleagues in the department until everyone is sick of the subject, and never be satisfied until you got a solution you feel you can defend ten years hence. It is necessary to make, not a quick decision, but the right decision. This takes a lot of hard work, and will also subject you to recrimination
from your colleagues who think you should decide faster, or who think that the issue is clear-cut and can be immediately resolved in the direction of whatever side they happen to favor.

These remarks apply particularly to decisions about appointments and promotions, which constitute the most important part of the work of departmental administration and, I would almost say, the only important part. This task is not only central but it is also difficult. It is extraordinarily hard to appraise a man's intellectual quality, to forecast how well he is likely to turn out, and to estimate not only the quantity of his scholarly production but also its value. Most people will agree in general terms that it is a fine thing to improve the quality of an institution, but few seem to realize the pains that must be taken to do this. Our procedures, as our experience has developed, have become rather elaborate: a special committee of the department is usually appointed, when a vacancy occurs, to study the credentials of candidates and to present recommendations for consideration by the full department; we may examine fifty or more dossiers before making an appointment; we often write the sponsors to request additional information, then check on the sponsors, and then check on the checkers; and when the crucial decision is being made the whole department may meet rather frequently; it has met as many as five times in a single week. Though such methods are laborious, they have paid off wonderfully well.

A great deal of your work should consist, not in dealing with problems that have arisen, but in forestalling those that may arise. The department is a delicate and complicated mechanism which runs surprisingly well in ordinary circumstances, but which can get into a lot of trouble if something
goes wrong. The different parts of the mechanism are so closely related that even a relatively insignificant difficulty can have uncomfortable repercussions. The most economical time to take action on a problem is before it develops, or when it is just beginning to develop. This does not mean of course that the action should be precipitate; even if you are dealing with a question in its elementary stages you should deal with it carefully and thoroughly and with a lot of discussion. This need to forestall applies particularly to meeting offers from other institutions. We have once or twice determined the fate of such an offer by giving appropriate recognition to the man involved several years before the offer was made.

I do not mean to suggest that you should give this kind of detailed consideration to everything that comes up in the office. There are a lot of minor matters, not worth worrying about, which just need to be settled, and it sometimes doesn't matter too much which way. You will gradually learn how to tell what is worth worrying about from what isn't; unfortunately the distinction is not always clear. However, a great deal of the work of the office is routine and easy, and you can do it when you are tired. Much of it is merely clerical.

From this follows another point. Your work as an administrator is not only less attractive than the work of your colleagues as teachers and scholars, but it is also less important. They are doing the real creative work in the department, while you are merely facilitating.

However, though most of your work will not be important, it will nevertheless be unpleasant, and you will find that you have to develop a high degree of tolerance of frustration. People are constantly coming into the
office—I have estimated that we get about 200 a day—the telephone is constantly ringing and, since we have only one secretary, you will never be able to finish dictating a letter of any length without one or two interruptions. Indeed your time at the office will consist principally of interruptions; you will not be able to do anything consecutively, except hold conferences, during office hours. You will also not be able to use the office at all a certain amount of the time; it is our only public room, and has to be employed for a number of different purposes. It is particularly in demand during graduate oral examination periods. Besides this, you will have lots of little chores that are so trifling and menial that you will not have the face to delegate them to your colleagues, and you will have to do them yourself.

On the other hand, it is absolutely necessary that a chairman keep up his research despite all obstacles. This is essential not only to your well-being as a scholar but also to your effectiveness as a chairman, since no one can properly preside over scholars who does not know from immediate and continued experience what their problems are. I think you would be well-advised to be selfish about this and to set aside a certain amount of your own time for this purpose. The office work can easily expand into two-thirds or three-fourths of your time if you let it. If you are going to do any work of your own, you will have to take active steps to protect yourself.

What makes this hard to do is the fact that, while the routine tasks of the chairman are not demanding, you have to keep yourself in a position where you can contribute unlimited amounts of time when an emergency comes up. The chairman must always be ready to push everything else aside, his research,
the preparation of his lectures, his personal life, at any time and at a moment's notice. The logic of the situation demands that the important department work be done with painstaking thoroughness and that, when necessary to this end, the preparation of lectures and research be slighted and done hastily and superficially. I have found many times that, just when my research was beginning to go well, I would have to give it up for weeks or even months, to deal with problems arising in the department. Despite all efforts at streamlining and despite the delegation of special tasks to some of my colleagues, I have never been able to get the job down below an average of 22 to 25 hours a week. I took much more time during my early years. You will also probably take more time than this at first, even though being a chairman counts as only one-third of your load.

There is not much to tell you about your relations with the rest of the department. You will know the obvious things, such as never pulling rank and never insisting on the prerogatives of your position. I think the main point here is to give members of the department not merely the support they are legally entitled to but far more. You should take up the projects and ideas they propose not only tolerantly but enthusiastically, give thought to them yourself, suggest means for getting assistance which your colleagues had not requested or even considered possible; in other words, give them much more help than they could reasonably demand or expect. This applies especially to research, but also to other things as well.

I believe, as I know you do, in running the department democratically. I have never made a recommendation to the administration on a matter of any moment which was not previously approved by a majority vote of the department.
These votes, further, have always been taken in department meetings and recorded in the minutes, except when they related to the limited number of subjects, such as promotions, which it would be awkward to discuss in an open meeting and on which the opinion of the department had to be ascertained by individual consultation instead. There are several good reasons for democratic procedures, but one that I would stress particularly is that they can provide a way out of an impasse. It is surprising how often bringing several minds to bear on a problem will gradually point the way to a solution, and a better solution than could have been devised by one individual working alone. Many questions cannot be resolved by a rule or a formula. However, extended discussion will frequently produce some way of getting around the matter, a solution which no one would have thought of at the outset, but which gives the substance of the thing desired. More than once, when I could not see my way clearly, exhaustive discussion in the department has produced an answer. Such successes as we have had have been due in large part to joint efforts of this kind. It is, however, the responsibility of a chairman to see that a subject is thoroughly canvassed; this doesn't happen of its own accord.

It is sometimes said that democratic methods in a department weaken the hand of the departmental executive officer in dealing with the administration. This is nonsense. A chairman is in a far stronger position if he has behind him, not a department which disagrees with a policy he has forced upon it, but a department that has shared in the determination of his policy and supports it. The one argument against democracy for which some shadow of a
case can be made is that it may promote mediocrity; that members of a weak department will appoint men like themselves and the department will not improve. I agree that, if there is a clear conflict between democracy and high intellectual standards, high intellectual standards must come first. I have some question, however, as to how often this argument is applicable. I have seen a number of cases in which weak departments, particularly when some encouragement and leadership were provided, have improved themselves, often to a degree that no observer would have anticipated. On the other hand, I have noted that the department heads most opposed to democracy have not always been those most zealous for the raising of standards.

However, democratic procedures are surprisingly difficult to maintain. For one thing, they run counter to the generally authoritarian character of the university. In most departments there are permanent heads rather than rotating chairmen, department meetings are infrequent or irregular, and the participation of the faculty in the management of the department is limited. A more considerable obstacle is that members of a department have a natural tendency to leave things to the chairman. The situation illustrates in some respects Michel’s iron law of oligarchy. Department members are very busy, they are sometimes simply not willing to take the time for thinking through major decisions, and they resent being burdened with the responsibility for doing so. On the other hand they resent not being consulted. There is no way out of this dilemma, since there exists a middle ground where the two resentments overlap. I have found it best to compel the department, occasionally against its wishes, to work through all decisions of major importance,
not only because this makes people more satisfied in the long run, but also because this is the right thing to do anyway. I want to point out, however, that the chairman, if he does not take active steps to prevent it, will find power increasingly concentrating in his hands.

I come now to relations with the administration. It will occasionally be necessary for you to take a firm line with your official superiors. The members of the administration are proud of the reputation the department has acquired and, on the whole, wish us well. Yet they will sometimes not see things quite from our point of view, and in such cases it will be necessary to represent this point of view rather emphatically. I have recently shown you some correspondence regarding a case in which I had to do this. On this particular matter, incidentally, the administration now concedes that I was right and it was wrong. I might add that in the eleven years since then the administration has moved toward a much more vigorous support of high intellectual standards, and has come to understand much better the kind of thing we are trying to do in the department. I doubt that so sharp a disagreement is likely to recur.

In making a protest to the administration, nothing is to be gained by intransigent opposition. You should assume, in conversations with an administrator, that he is also trying to do the best he can according to his lights, and you will get much further if you try to see his point of view and the arguments that can be made for his position, even if you must ultimately disagree in whole or in part. Further, it often happens, when a matter has been talked out and the positions of both sides thoroughly explored, that
the area of difference is smaller than originally supposed and that a formula can be found which will satisfy everyone.

In making a proposal to the administration, I have always found that I was on stronger ground if I stated the objections to it as well as the arguments for it, and indeed dwelt on the objections particularly to make sure they were thoroughly canvassed before a decision was reached. This prevents unpleasant consequences from coming home to roost later, it makes it possible to discriminate between our proposals in terms of urgency and importance, and it gives the administration convincing assurance that the recommendations coming from the department are responsible and judicious, and are made only after careful thought has been given to both sides of the question.

Further, it is not necessarily always the case that professors are right and the administration is wrong. I have stood out against the administration, on some issues, more vigorously, so far as I know, than any other department chairman in the Liberal Arts College, and I have expressed with great frankness and emphasis my disagreement with certain policies that have been pursued by the university as a whole. On the other hand, I have found that on some other subjects the thinking of the administration has proved clearer, more careful and more farsighted than that of the faculty. I had, in particular, a disillusioning experience some years ago with the University Faculty Council. I addressed to them a long letter in which I urged them to agitate for higher salaries for graduate assistants. They delayed unconscionably, and the only concrete action they took was that they lost my letter. After I had presented them with additional copies of it they declined, in the end, to recommend action on this matter to the president on the ground that it might upset him
and distract his attention from their other recommendations. I then took the matter to the deans of the Liberal Arts and Graduate Colleges, who saw the point, took up the question vigorously, showed no apparent fear of upsetting the president, and procured effective action. So far as I know, the general raise in stipends for graduate assistants several years ago came originally from my initiative. I was forced to conclude that, in this case at least, the Faculty Council had acted timidly and had construed the interests of the faculty in what still seems to me a narrow and short-sighted fashion.

Furthermore, on the complex questions with which we have to deal, the opinion of the administration can sometimes be helpful. It brings a wider or at least a different perspective to bear and it can contribute new insights which may help towards a solution. I have made it a policy to discuss problems very frankly with my immediate superior, not only criticizing the policies of the administration, which I have done often, but also getting his ideas on difficulties facing the department. I have found that my criticisms were taken in good part, and that my confidences were never taken advantage of. Such interchanges have in fact been extremely helpful. You must, of course, be sure of your administrator. A relationship of this kind would not be possible with everybody and, in any case, mutual confidence and understanding take time to develop.

However, in your relations with the administration there are several things you should watch out for. They may try to make you cut down the number of teaching assistants in our large freshman course, as an economy measure, by changing, from our present system of two lectures and two
section meetings per week, to three lectures and one section meeting, or four lectures and no section meetings. This comes up every so often, and I have fought it for years. There is also a chance that some of the offices of the university may try to take advantage of your inexperience to revise in their favor their arrangements with the department. These matters are hard to judge, since there may quite possibly be a reasonable case for changing the situation. For example, the publications department, when I took over, wanted to be relieved of their share in the cost of our annual News Letter, and I thought their request was a fair one. In other cases I found it necessary to protest with some emphasis. I should particularly advise you to examine narrowly your accounts from the Business Office during your first year. Incidentally, it is always desirable to assume, in your negotiations with other departments, that the other people are trying to do the right thing, no matter how overwhelming the evidence to the contrary may be.

This is all I think of at the present. I should be glad to talk over with you any special problems that arise on which you may want to consult me.