

Many perceive the decision-making role of the department head as becoming increasingly complex.

# Department heads as decision makers

By Janice Wissman

The academic department as the basic organizational unit within a university is a widely accepted assumption (Millet, 1978; McHenry and Associates, 1977; Corson, 1975; and Bolton and Boyer, 1973). The administrator who traditionally heads the department is usually referred to as chairman or head.

The department as the locus of decision making is emphasized in the literature. Roach (1976) estimated that 80 percent of all university decisions take place at the departmental level. Dykes (1968) and McLaughlin and others (1975) studied faculty participation in decision making and noted the most significant participation level in decision making was at the departmental level.

It is evident administrators of academic departments play an important role in decision making. The importance of this role results from their position (administrator) and from the organized unit with which they are affiliated (department).

The purpose of this study was to explore decision making by department heads through a review of literature and interviews with five department heads in a selected College of Home Economics at a Midwest land-grant university. Specifically, the study sought answers to the following questions: 1) What types of decisions do department heads make? 2) What future critical decisions do department heads predict? 3) Is the decision-making power of department heads increasing or decreasing? and

4) What kind of experiences could contribute positively to decision-making skills utilized by department heads?

## FINDINGS

### Types of Decisions

Corson (1976) emphasized the variability among departments in relation to the types of decisions made by department chairmen. Findings from interviews with five department heads (1979), however, seem to be in agreement with such authors as Balderston (1974) and Hoyt and Spangler (1977) as they note department heads tend to make similar types of decisions regardless of the department. The decision types identified related to personnel (including faculty placement, evaluation, tenure, promotion, and salary), curriculum (including scheduling course offerings), and budget. Only two out of the five department heads interviewed identified student-related decisions. One department administrator noted space- and time-related decisions.

Personnel decisions appeared to be the most difficult for the department heads. There seemed to be no consensus concerning what types of decisions take the most time. Criteria used for decision making by these selected department heads related primarily to departmental goals and the individuals directly affected by the decision. When confronted with decisions that have both long-term and short-term consequences, one department head said she almost always places more weight on the long-term consequences before she arrives at a decision (Spears, 1979).

Most writers perceive the decision-making role of department chairmen as becoming increasingly complex (Brann and Emmet, 1972; McIntosh and Maier, 1976). Future critical decisions identified by the five department heads interviewed (1979) related to faculty evaluation, dismissal of faculty members, space, and goal setting (especially critical in consideration of so many external pressures). One department head expressed special concern about the external pressure to take programs and classes off campus (Spears, 1979).

### Power and Autonomy of Department Heads in Decision Making

The autonomy and power of a department head in the decision-making process both appear to be affected by such variables as pressures outside the college, outside the university, within the department, the professional field, the personality of the dean and the decision-making philosophy of the department head.

Gross and Grambsch (1977) reported their research findings that indicated the power role of department chairmen had declined between 1964 and 1971, while Corson (1975) noted the curtailment of autonomy of department chairmen due to external pressures. R.L.D. Morse (1979), a department head for 24 years, noted an overall decrease in power not only due to external pressures but also due to internal pressures from faculty and students. Morse (1979) and Huyck (1979) both emphasized the part that the personality of a dean plays in the amount of power and autonomy a department head has. McLaughlin and others (1975) even noted the differences in power for departmentally-made decisions among different colleges. (In their study, departmental chairmen in Colleges of Arts and Sciences had more power than their counterparts in other colleges including Colleges of Home Economics.) Huyck (1979) expressed her philosophy of decision making that

is in agreement with Hoy and Miskel (1979) as they all point out the need for autonomy by the administrator in making certain decisions. Huyck (1979) said there are situations when only the department head has access to the necessary information for decision making.

### Preparation for Decision-Making Roles of Department Heads

Roach (1976), believing the role of department head is becoming more significant, points out the need for training for the position. McKeachie (1968) suggested all scholars are prepared adequately for becoming a department head because of their scholarly habits related to problem solving. Brann (1972) disagreed. He said scholars have worked with the tools of analysis not synthesis. Furthermore, scholars' preference for contemplation and reflection is not always appropriate in situations that call for quick decision making. McIntosh and Maier (1976) remind their readers that different skills (creative management skills) are needed now rather than the coping and balancing-the-budget skills administrators needed in the late '60s and early '70s. The five department heads interviewed (1979) recommended a management-training background together with professional expertise as important preparation for the decision-making roles of a department head. These experiences were cited because of the perspective they provide. One department head added, "One must also know how to select a good secretary" (Morse, 1979).

Department heads are decision makers by virtue of their role (administrator) and organizational unit affiliation (department). Personnel, curriculum, and financial decisions are among the major decisions made by department heads identified in this paper. Among these decisions, personnel-related decisions are the ones most difficult to make. Departmental goals and those individuals directly affected by the respective decisions were the decision-making criteria most often cited. Goal setting, personnel evaluation, faculty dismissal and space-related decisions were identified as future critical decisions. External pressures were recognized as contributing to loss of overall power of department heads. Management training was an example of one of the experiences considered appropriate for preparing one to make departmental decisions.

### CONCLUSIONS

This article does not attempt to deal with the theoretical constructs of decision making. It does, however, reveal the types of decisions department heads make as they operate on both a horizontal and vertical plane. Most of the perceptions of the interviewed department heads are consistent with the findings in the literature concerning decision making. It is interesting to note that while many believe the overall power of department heads has decreased because of external pressures, the decision-making role of the department head is recognized as becoming more complex. Decision-making programs for newly selected or elected department heads, would-be department heads, and experienced department heads appear to have an audience. As colleges and universities continue to seek to serve new markets, it behooves them to consider such programs.

### NOTES

1. Department heads interviewed included: Jane Bowers, Ph.D.;

Elnora Huyck, Ph.D.; R.L.D. Morse, Ph.D.; Mary Don Peterson, Ed.D.; and Marian Spears, Ph.D.

### BIBLIOGRAPHY

Balderston, Frederick E., "Constituencies and Academic Organizations," *Managing Today's University*, San Francisco, California: Jossey-Bass, Inc., 1974, pp. 38-72.

Balderston says departments as units of academic organizations deliver the main products of the university. Decision-making roles of department chairmen identified relate to course assignment duties, budgetary resources, and personnel administration. He points to the difficulties department administrators encounter as they become involved in satisfying both central administrators and department colleagues. The university administration regards the chairman as a first line supervisor interpreting and enforcing university policies and regulations, and making "sensible" budget allocations. Department members, on the other hand, regard the chairman as a colleague and advocate.

Baldrige, J. Victor, David V. Curtis, George Ecker, and Gary R. Riley, *Policy Making and Effective Leadership*, San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, Inc., 1978.

This book is one of several publications that grew out of the Stanford Project on Academic Governance directed by Baldrige between 1970 and 1974. The authors contend that if one is to examine the decision structures and processes of colleges and universities, one must study the academic departments—the center of professional activities.

Bolton, Charles K. and Ronald K. Boyer, "Organizational Development for Academic Departments," *The Journal of Higher Education*, May, 1973, pp. 352-369.

The authors suggest that because the department is the basic organizational unit of the university, the adaptive success of the larger institution is largely contingent upon the ability of the department to adapt creatively to the forces for change.

Brann, James and Thomas A. Emmet, editors, *The Academic Department or Division Chairman: A Complex Role*, Detroit, Michigan: Balamp Publishing, 1972.

This book is an outgrowth of a series of institutes and seminars sponsored by Higher Education Executive Associates between 1968 and 1970. Twenty-eight papers—all dealing directly or indirectly with the roles of department chairmen—are included in this publication. In the first paper, James Brann (pp. 5-11) discusses the department chairman as the foreman in higher education—the person who sees that the work gets done. He reminds the reader that this foreman has been trained for a life as a scholar, not for administration. R.J. Henle, a university president, in excerpts from a talk, "The Structure of Academic Organization," (pp. 227-237) points out that department administration consists basically of making decisions and seeing that they are carried out. Because administration has become so complex and is so unlike the field for which most scholars are prepared, fewer scholars are willing to be department chairmen. One solution to this dilemma, according to Henle, is to hire administrative assistants to assist professional administrators.

Corson, John L., "Leadership in the College or University," *The Governance of Colleges and Universities*, N.Y.: McGraw-Hill Book Co., 1975, pp. 249-273.

In a chapter on leadership, Corson points out that in a time when decisive governance is great as it is now in higher education, the authority of those responsible for leadership—the department chairman, the dean, the president, and the trustees—has been limited. Corson notes the department as the basic organizational block of a college or university. He defines effective departmental leadership then identifies constraints for leadership.

Dressel, Paul L. and William H. Faricy, "Autonomy and Academic Freedom," *Return to Responsibility*, San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, Inc., 1972, pp. 13-27.

The authors note autonomy in a university is affected by the interdependence of its components. Department autonomy in decision making is especially affected by the resources available and the restrictions imposed upon their use. Other restrictions

related to autonomy are cited.

Dykes, Archie R., **Faculty Participation in Academic Decision Making**, American Council on Education, 1968.

This monograph is a report of a study undertaken to ascertain faculty members' perception of their "proper roles" in academic decision making and what they see as their actual role. Dr. Dykes, in this study based upon personal interviews with the faculty of one college (Liberal Arts and Sciences) in a large Midwest university, concludes the most significant participation level in decision making is not in the senate, or in committees, or in the local chapter of AAUP, but in the department.

Gross, Edward and Paul V. Grambsch, "Power Structure in Universities and Colleges," **Governing Academic Organizations** (Gary L. Riley and J. Victor Baldrige, editors), Berkeley, California: McCutchen Publishing Corporation, 1977, pp. 26-41.

The authors report on a research study where they compared the power structure within private and public universities in 1964 and again in 1971. They note that most individuals, involved internally or externally with the university, either held to their former ability to control others or had increased their power with the exception of department chairmen. They believe the implication may be serious for chairmen when considering they slipped from eighth place (1964) to ninth place in 1971. They note that the individuals who increased their power considerably include such "outsiders" as legislators, regents, government and such "insiders" as students and faculty. Top administrators appeared to remain in similar "power-perceived positions" between 1964 and 1971.

Hoy, Wayne K. and Cecil E. Miskel, "Decision Making," **Educational Administration: Theory, Research, and Practice**, N.Y.: Random House, 1978, pp. 212-237.

Noting that decision making is a major responsibility of all administrators, the authors review six basic assumptions related to decision making, then discuss the steps in the process. Studies related to decision making in educational administration are cited. Also included is a report on a simulated study in administrative decision making they call one of the best and most comprehensive to date in the field.

Hoyt, Donald P. and Ronald K. Spangler, **Administrative Effectiveness of the Academic Department Head, Research Report #42**, Manhattan, Kansas, Kansas State University: Office of Educational Research, July, 1977.

Background information in this study identifies functions of department heads. The study—the first of a series by Dr. Hoyt and associates—was intended to develop a procedure for evaluating administrative effectiveness of a department head. The instrument is discussed and presented together with validity and reliability information. Recommendations are included for further use.

McHenry, D.E. and Associates, editors, **Academic Departments: Problems, Variations and Alternatives**, San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, Inc., 1977.

This book, devoted entirely to academic departments in higher education, is divided into three sections with various authors responsible for the individual chapters. The history of departments in higher education is presented together with a defense of departments as a basic unit of higher education. Strengths of departmental organizations relate primarily to graduate education and promotion of academic staff, while criticism relates to undergraduate education. Alternatives to traditional departmental structures are presented as they exist in the United States and Great Britain. The last section of the book dealing with leadership within academic departments has implications for one exploring the decision-making roles of department leaders.

McIntosh, Elaine and Robert Maier, "Management Skills in a Changing Academic Environment," **Educational Record**, Spring, 1976, pp. 87-91.

The authors emphasize that different decision-making skills are needed by administrators in higher education today. Problems of retrenchment call for administrators trained in "creative management." In addition, today's administrators must possess special attributes of courage, resourcefulness and independence.

McKeachie, Wilbert, "Memo to New Department Chairmen," **Educational Record**, Spring, 1968, pp. 221-227.

The author, a department chairman selected from within the faculty, assures the reader that it is the variety and complexity of the chairman's problems that make the job fascinating to one trained for problem solving. One's scholarly habits such as the ability to analyze a problem, amass available evidence and consider the adequacy of several alternative hypotheses are as relevant and useful in solving the problems of the department as they are in scholarly research—only the variables are different. He discusses recruitment, faculty participation, course assignments, research opportunities, committees and dealings with deans.

McLaughlin, Gerald W., James W. Montgomery, and Leslie F. Malpass, "Selected Characteristics, Roles, Goals and Satisfaction of Department Chairmen in State and Land-Grant Institutions," **Research in Higher Education**, Vol. 3, 1975, pp. 243-259.

This article reports the findings of a survey of department chairmen in 38 state universities. Based upon information from these department chairmen, major roles are classified administrative, academic and leadership. Those surveyed say they were most comfortable with the role of academician, and least enjoyed the administrative role. Slightly more than one-half of those surveyed reported major decision making at the departmental level, with veto power at the university level. Department chairmen in arts and sciences (as compared with chairmen in agriculture, business, education, engineering, home economics and medicine), reported fewer major decisions made at university and college levels. Correspondingly, they said more decisions were made by departmental committees.

Milliet, John D., **New Structures of Campus Power**, San Francisco, California: Jossey-Bass, Inc., 1978.

In the last chapter related to the future of academic governance, Milliet displays his belief that the academic department is where the action is in higher education. He supports this belief by quoting statements and studies by contemporary leaders in higher education. Milliet, a former university president, recognizes the important roles department chairmen play in managing the primary unit of a college or university.

Roach, James, "The Academic Department Chairperson: Functions and Responsibilities," **Educational Record**, Winter, 1976, pp. 13-23.

Roach estimates that 80 percent of all university administrative decisions take place at the department level. Pointing to the important role the department chairman takes in shaping the educational mission of a school, he notes limited literature describing the functions, responsibilities, and lack of training of department chairmen.

Smart, John C., "Duties Performed by Department Chairmen in Holland's Model Environments," **Journal of Educational Psychology**, April, 1976, pp. 194-204.

Smart conducted research to demonstrate that chairmen of academic departments (classified according to Holland's Model Environments) devote different amounts of time to selected dimensions of their job. His findings included among others that chairmen in artistic, social, and conventional environments tend to devote more time to curriculum decision making than chairmen in other departments. The tendency of chairmen in realistic and investigative environments to devote more time to "graduate programs" and research goals duties than their colleagues in artistic, social and conventional environments supports other research findings.