

Planning Your Exit Strategy

Jay Meehan | October 14, 2016

My mother had some very endearing qualities. Into her 90's she enjoyed discussions about politics, was very connected to her grandchildren and great-grandchildren and she relished her vodka martini "up" (no ice) and definitely "skip the garbage" (i.e., the olives). She also had an interesting way of welcoming visitors saying "now that you've arrived, when are you leaving?" Which leads me to this month's tip.

Planning Your Exit Strategy

One of the roles for the chair fellow envisioned by the CETL Advisory Committee of Chairs and Program Directors is to provide support and mentoring for new chairs and program directors. However, I was struck by a recent mentoring session which focused on developing a "seasoned" chair/program director's "exit strategy." In other words, after a number of years leading a department, how does one plan for their transition from department/program leader to faculty member?

Look at your Chair or Program Director selection procedures. By contract, under Article VII, 35 (p.8) of the 2015-2020 Agreement, each academic unit must have procedures for making chairperson recommendations to the dean. So, for chairs (in both "Big D" and "Little d" departments) there is a process to consult and to keep in mind as you and your department/unit plan for succession. For program directors there may be a process in place, depending upon the contract letter you signed before assuming the position. The key point here is that your unit's procedures may require you to declare your intent to step down which triggers the selection process. If you are program director, a position that is not subject to the Agreement, you may want to ask your dean if there are procedures that office utilizes to pick your successor. (The role of chairs and program directors from a contractual perspective is a separate issue I will discuss in the near future.)

Article on Chair Succession A second place to consult is the Summer 2016 issue of The Department Chair Journal (on our CETL website) which has an article on chair succession:

<http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com.huayu.kl.oakland.edu/doi/10.1002/dch.30087/full>

It contains some very good tips, but as I read them, it focuses more on transition issues from the standpoint of the department/university, rather than the person exiting the leadership role. So, here are some of the issues that I have come across and some words of advice.

- **Who's next?** When you look around your department/program, you can envision some colleagues as possible leaders and others who are definitely not in that category. Individual characteristics such as temperament, evidence of leadership qualities, judgment and professional competence and accomplishment all factor into such assessments. Who can best represent the whole department effectively?

There may also a personal element here, especially if during your time as chair/program director, you made strides in changing the department ethos or enhanced the visibility and growth of the program through new initiatives. Should one care that ending your term places such accomplishments at risk? To a degree, yes, but not to the point where it is detrimental to you and your professional well-being.

The department's demographics can definitely constrain the pool of candidates. Your department may be young and have more un-tenured and newly tenured faculty, and a pool of older tenured faculty who have either "taken their turn" or who cannot or should never be in a leadership role. I have heard chairs and program directors say (BTW, that includes me) that they remained or are remaining in their position because the next crop of faculty aren't ready yet. Don't fall into that trap!

- **Is the next leader only your problem?** The obvious answer to that is NO—it is a department, program and school/college level problem. But a leader who “cares” tends to take passing the torch more to heart, shouldering more of the burden when it is clearly time for you to let your colleagues, and/or your dean, step up whether they want to or not.

Your exit strategy should begin with an assessment of what is best for you and your professional and personal goals and aspirations. It is too easy to forget a sociological maxim that all social institutions precede and transcend the individual. In short—the institution will survive. Think about how many administrative academic leaders you have seen come and go. As I enter my 30th year at Oakland, I have experienced the leadership periods of 7 (soon to be 8) University Presidents, 10 Provosts, and 9 Deans. This number includes leaders who held interim/acting titles some of which were more akin to a New York minute, but you get the point. It is okay to begin your exit strategy thinking about you.

So, what are some practical considerations?

1. **Look to the Future** The first questions you should ask is “where do I plan to focus my professional energy in my chair after-life” and “what can I do now to make that transition easier for me?” Thinking a year ahead (or more) makes a lot of sense. Are you an associate professor looking at promotion to full professor? How have your chair years impacted that goal? Some departments/units explicitly value leadership roles (such as chair/program director); others not so much. Are there ways to find support to offset some of the deficits created by your chair/program director service? For example, one person described how they had not presented at conferences in two years because they felt swamped by their chair duties. Another person eligible for sabbatical decided to defer thinking they would just be the chair/program director in absentia and would not get any research or writing done. (Note: don’t sacrifice conference or sabbatical plans—“#we’ll survive without you”). Planning ahead might include thinking about the October University Research Committee deadline for Summer Fellowships for the first summer you are no longer chair.
2. **Plan Your Teaching Responsibilities** Don’t forget too you will be transitioning to a new teaching load. One full professor ex- chair confessed to me that early in their career they short-changed their teaching for research. They were a good teacher, but upon returning to faculty they set as their professional goal to be a better teacher. They have worked harder and smarter re-designing their classes and assignments and it has been paying off. The challenge of returning to a full load in the classroom should not be underestimated. You should consider scheduling/requesting classes that best suit what you have already taught and perhaps consider (if your department has such an option), a special topics class that coincides with your research or pedagogical interests. Better yet, perhaps your unit should adopt a workload policy that chairs and program directors have a course release built into the first year (or two) after stepping down. It could even be titrated to the number of years served in the chair/program director role. And don’t forget too, I know chairs and program directors have filled less desirable teaching time slots (think 8 AM!), and covered needed classes during their tenure to keep their faculty—and the scheduling gods—happy. It is okay to consider cashing in on some of those sacrifices you made as a leader that are often invisible to many.

I am happy to talk with you about an exit strategy. Everyone’s situation is different, requiring a tailor-made approach. And like my mother’s martini, you can be rest assured that I will provide you the strongest possible advice and we will definitely skip the garbage. This is about you and your well-being. The department and institution will survive. Cheers! Or as my mother would say in Slovak, “Na zdravie!”—“to your health.”