

RUSTOUT OR BURNOUT?

A College Chair Offers Some Suggestions for Dealing With Stress

BY GERRY COLVIN

As I review my appointment calendar for this past year, I am acutely aware of the theme of almost all the visits to my office: self-concern and self-interest. I am not surprised, of course, because this is the nature of my assignment as an assistant dean for graduate studies in education. However, the incessant strain of being solicited for special privileges can be very burdensome.

Behind the achievements of many great academics lies the factor of stress. A study of 1,200 faculty members revealed how stress interacted with their productivity.¹ A moderate amount of stress seemed to help them reach peak performance, but when stress reached "excessive" proportions (burnout), their performance declined significantly. Without *sufficient* stress (rustout), however, their performance also declined.

A study of 564 academic department heads investigated the most stressful situations, emergent themes, and different stressors for department chairs and faculty.² For administrators, most stress came from heavy workloads, time pressures, confrontations with colleagues, organizational constraints, and faculty-like duties. Faculty and administrative pressures compounded each other.

More than 800 academic department chairs, stratified by discipline, were selected from research and doctorate-grant-

ing institutions. They completed the Department Chair Stress Index along with demographic questions.³ Results indicate that, overall, stress among department chairs is intense. Chairs experienced high stress both in faculty and administrative areas of concern.

Job descriptions ill prepare academic administrators for the pressures they must confront daily. The role of the department chair continues to be ambiguous, unclear in terms of authority, and very difficult to classify as faculty or administrator—all of which contributes to excessive levels of stress.

Institutions of higher education differ from many other organizations in requiring leadership to be a more shared experience. Consequently, most academic chairpersons must place greater emphasis on empowering activities. While highlighting and strengthening the skills of faculty, these activities often fail to fulfill either the administrator's or observers' expectations of a "strong" chairperson.

Academic department chairpersons are open to criticism—and entreaty—from many directions: (1) *Top-down* from presidents, provosts, executive assistants, vice presidents, assistant vice-presidents, and executive directors; (2) *Horizontally* from deans, division heads, and other chairpersons; and (3) *Bottom-up* from directors, coordinators, program leaders, faculty, adjuncts, and students.



The Case of the Put-Off Student

A major assignment of many chairs and division heads is to create and oversee class schedules and departmental courses offered. One colleague from a moderate-size university told me recently that each of the four campuses at her university averages 30 courses per campus during each fall and winter semester and for each of three summer sessions, while employing 40 full-time and 26 adjunct faculty (including field-work supervisors) per semester/session. "This opens the way," she grimaced, "for at least 100,000 scheduling errors each term, with 500,000-plus such errors possible in a calendar year!"

I know the feeling. An angry graduate student recently lambasted me for printing the wrong starting time for a summer class. Somehow she had missed our later correction of the error. Because of her work, she would likely miss the first three mornings of the new class unless fellow workers could cover for her.

Although the professor was willing to "forgive" her absences, he did want her to do a make-up library paper. Insulted at such a request, she came to me and declared that my office had caused her to miss the first three morning sessions. I apologized and said that I had been assured everyone had been contacted. Then I mused aloud, "What if we had informed you? You are working anyway; what difference would it have made?"

Undaunted, she replied, "Well, I could have had more time to arrange for someone to substitute for me at work." I immediately offered her the use of my phone to call long distance to arrange for substitutes, but she declined.

Her teacher later told me that he had finally suggested that she choose not to do any make-up work. "Oh, but my grade would suffer!" the student exclaimed. "Yes," responded the professor, "but at least you wouldn't have to do the work!"

Nothing I could say to this student seemed to help. Although she poured a goodly portion of her anger onto me, she walked away with enough left to

Behind the achievements of many great academics lies the factor of stress.

frighten the average person. Still, because I *had* provided her the freedom to express her anger, I hoped that I had been of some help. In return, however, she had certainly increased my stress level for the day!

Attack From the Flank

A chair at a sister university is sometimes blind-sided by a colleague assigned by her dean to monitor the class assignments she makes to her faculty. My friend has three coordinators assisting her on other campuses. She is on the telephone with them daily adjusting and modifying schedule needs, as well as monitoring the programs in general. She visits each center twice each semester, besides holding monthly meetings with the coordinators. Yet, in spite

of all of her interaction and "up-close" supervision of those who assist her in adjusting schedules, she must still answer to a peer who has been empowered to oversee her professional activities. "More than once," she declares, "I have almost quit my post in disgust!"

The Case of the "Bully" Student

In an instance leading to bottom-up criticism, a graduate student was permitted to continue in her program beyond the time limit. She had switched majors a number of times. This was compounded by an ambiguous program option (before my arrival), a lack of initial designation of her major (a glitch years ago), and misinformation from a well-meaning colleague.

Her advisor characterized her as a bully. Over the period of a year, she summarily condemned a number of us for giving wrong advice, for failing to communicate with one another, and for treating her unlike other students. (The last accusation was certainly true. Had I dealt with her as I do with most of the other students who pass through my office, I would have required her to reapply for admission and start over with new program standards.)

Nevertheless, we finally decided to take the high road, and made extraordinary modifications to accommodate her



in the best way we knew how. None of us anticipated any "thank you's," nor did we receive any. We just hoped that she would not change her mind yet one more time.

In some ways, the discomfort of department chairs (and school deans) is not so unlike the plight of the church director. A pastor of a large congregation anguished, "The senior minister is expected to praise, compliment, offer concern and support, and make sure everyone else is doing OK. No one seems to realize that the senior minister also needs these things."⁴

Another church administrator disparaged the criticism of himself for not giving exactly the same amount of attention to everyone, for failing to notice each and every offense of a subordinate, or for permitting one member to appear closer to him than another. He lamented, "I'm weary from the amount of energy that I must be willing to expend. I am weary from never having a moment to myself—a day that is entirely mine—because I am so busy stomping out a myriad of fires that break out all around me."⁵

Department Chairs

Department chairs frequently experience excessive stress. After all, they can extinguish only so many brush fires before they themselves burn out. At

Job descriptions ill prepare academic administrators for the pressures they must confront daily.

that point, stress can become an extremely powerful enemy, playing a major role in a variety of illnesses and dysfunctions. Although Gmelch and Miskin⁶ have developed an elaborate three-stage plan for assisting chairs in reducing their stress, their counsel might be summarized in these relatively simple directives:

1. Identify a bothersome *stressor* over which you have some control.
2. Search for the *causes* of the stressor event.
3. Generate a set of possible *solutions* to remedy the causes.
4. Specify a *plan* to alleviate the cause.
5. Develop a *timetable* to implement the plan.

6. Set a date and method of *follow-up*, and evaluate the effectiveness of your plan.

7. Investigate potential problems of *unintended consequences* that the plan may have created.

Although the above approach may seem overly systematic, its plodding nature is precisely what makes it effective. An example of the seven-step solution process is shown in Figure 1. The particular focus in this instance is on "too heavy a workload." Attempts to eliminate the cause are made throughout.⁷

Practical Advice to Stressed-Out Chairs

No single, best answer exists for coping with stress problems. Still, focusing on specific areas can help in attacking the general sources of department chair stress.

Managing your management time. Paperwork, meetings, and deadlines are not the ends of managerial and academic productivity but the means to important goals of higher education. Identify high-payoff (HIPO) activities (most important, not urgent) that will help you attain excellence in both management and faculty responsibilities.

Budget, personnel, and personal productivity activities should take precedence over administrative details, unimportant meetings, filing memos, and answering low-priority correspondence. At the same time, see that routine paperwork is handled by assistants, telephone calls are screened, and time is blocked into uninterrupted periods for productive, thoughtful work. When necessary, have a HIPO hideout where you can retreat to prepare manuscripts and keep up with your academic discipline.

Productive conflict resolution. The chairperson's most frequent and serious conflict arises when confronting peers, and, on occasion, the dean. Remember that the power of the chair does not rest so much in the position (power of reward and punishment) as in the person (influence by referent, expertise, and collegiality). Therefore, use your position power sparingly and establish a



solid personal power base with your dean and faculty by interacting with them in an open and professional manner. If you are caught between the demands of the administration and the needs of the faculty, explore the common interests that transcend—and satisfy—both parties. Work on getting faculty involved and having them buy into the solutions—become more of a facilitator than a director.

Academic productivity. The number-one stressor for department chairs is



Figure 1

Chair Action Plan - "Heavy Workload"

I. Most bothersome stress event: *Too heavy a workload, one that cannot be finished in a day.*

II. CAUSES

1. Unrealistic appraisal of time
2. Inability to say "no"
3. Overcommitted to family
4. Unclear delineation of responsibilities
5. Cannot distinguish between high and low priorities

III. SOLUTIONS

1. Conduct time schedules
2. Gain assertive skills
3. Set family/job goals
4. Request specific Faculty Planning Guide
5. Concentrate on high-priority tasks

IV. SPECIFIC ACTION PLAN

- a. The plan is to concentrate on high-payoff tasks
- b. Type of action:
 - corrective
 - interim
 - adaptive
 - preventive
 - contingent

V. STEPS FOR IMPLEMENTATION

1. Activity: Develop high-payoff and low-payoff lists
2. Where: In the office at my desk with no interruptions
3. How Often: Daily for two weeks
4. When: Every morning at 8:30 a.m.

VI. FOLLOW-UP EVALUATION

1. Did I write out my lists every morning?
2. Were the high-payoff tasks completed first?
3. Did I actually delegate or eliminate any low-payoff tasks?
- 4.

VII. NEGATIVE UNINTENDED CONSEQUENCES

1. My dean became upset with incomplete tasks.
2. Work became too regimented and not as carefree.
3. I created an overload for my staff by delegating too many tasks to them.
- 4.

MODIFICATIONS OF PLAN NEEDED? Since my dean needs to know what I am concentrating on (high payoffs), I should communicate with him/her periodically to seek concurrence with my plan.

trying to keep current in their disciplines. Preparing manuscripts for publication and maintaining academic career progress also rank in their top 10 stress traps. In short, department chairs are the prisoners of pressures for faculty productivity as well as challenges intrinsic to administrative leadership. Protect your time and resources with the responses at your disposal:

- Block out uninterrupted periods for scholarly activities,
- Devote at least a half day each week to personal academic endeavors,
- Establish a research or writing team of faculty members and/or graduate students, and
- Negotiate a sabbatical between terms or at the end of the term to bring yourself up to date in your discipline.

Remember, any approach to reducing stress depends on both the chair's willingness to seek creative solutions and the institution's commitment to develop effective and productive leadership. While the future for academic leadership may seem filled with stress, it is also replete with challenges and creative opportunities. ☞

Dr. Gerry Colvin is Assistant Dean for Graduate Studies in Education in the School of Education and Related Professions at Ashland University, Ashland, Ohio. He has taught or served as an administrator at three North American Division SDA colleges.

REFERENCES

1. P. K. Wilke, Walter H. Gmelch, and N. P. Lovirich, "Stress and Productivity: Evidence of the Inverted U-Function," *Public Productivity Review* 9:4 (1985), pp. 342-352.
2. Walter H. Gmelch and John S. Burns, "The Cost of Academic Leadership: Department Chair Stress," *Innovative Higher Education* 17:4 (1993), pp. 259-270.
3. _____, "Sources of Stress for Academic Department Chairpersons," *Journal of Educational Administration* 32:1 (1994), pp. 79-94.
4. James Ryan, *Scriptural Images of Stress in the Ministry for Senior Ministers of Large Congregations* (Washington, D.C.: The Alban Institute, 1989), p. 33.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 48.
6. Walter H. Gmelch and Val D. Miskin, *Leadership Skills for Department Chairs* (Boston: Anker, 1993).
7. *Ibid.*, p. 163.