Chairing the Academic Occupational Therapy Department: A Job Analysis

(administration, occupational therapy; education, occupational therapy; faculty, occupational therapy)

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The role of department chair is one of the most important roles in academia, yet chairs are rarely formally prepared for it. A modified job analysis format can be used to examine the role of the chair. In addition to administrative responsibilities, the chair, who is usually selected from the faculty, has teaching, research, and service responsibilities. Administrative functions include dealing with data (finances and programs), people (students, faculty, support personnel, the dean, and other administrators), and things (department reports, space, equipment, and materials).

There is a high attrition rate of department chairs. Occupational therapy students and therapists must be taught to see the academic chair position as an opportunity for a challenging career encompassing academia and administration.

The title department chair (or chairperson) is the most common for the job; yet the titles department head, program director, and division chief are also used. The department chair is the individual who is responsible for the operation of the department. The chair takes care of the business affairs of the department. She or he is concerned with the finances, programs, personnel, and students within the department and with the articulation of the department within the institution. Chairs usually hold the dual roles of faculty member and administrator. Appointed from the faculty ranks, the chair continues to teach, conduct research and other scholarly activities, and provide service to the university, civic, and professional communities. Accepting the position of chair means accepting the additional administrative responsibility of administering the department as an institutional unit.

Worker Traits

Worker traits are those traits that a worker needs to perform a given job well. These traits include education and training, aptitudes and temperament, and the ability to cope with the physical demands and environmental conditions of the job (1).

The Academic Department

An understanding of the academic department as a work setting is important for considering a profile of the department chair and for discussing desirable characteristics of the chair and the training for the role of chair. The academic department is the basic administrative unit of academic institutions. A university or college is a collective of specialty knowledge bases that are housed in academic departments. The function of a department is to develop, preserve, and disseminate specialized knowledge.

The activities in the department determine whether the educational institution can achieve its goals (2,
An estimated 80% of an institution's decisions are made at the department level (4). The leadership at this level can make or break an institution. While a university can survive with ineffective leadership in the president's office, the same is not true at the department level (5). An institution is only as good as its departments, and the stature of the department depends on the leadership provided by the chair.

In occupational therapy, the academic department organizes, defines, articulates, disseminates, and develops the body of knowledge on which the profession is based. The department transmits this knowledge by training occupational therapy practitioners and by producing professional publications and presentations.

**Department Chair Profile**

There were 80,000 department chairs in American higher education in 1980 (3). The typical chair is 46 years old, male, and tenured; he has a doctorate degree, holds the rank of professor, supervises 13 full-time faculty members, and will resign in six years. The chair usually has had no administrative experience prior to accepting the chair position. He or she was appointed from the faculty, has served on the faculty for ten years, and was selected jointly by the dean and the faculty. After holding the position, about half of the chairs will return to teaching full time, one third will go into other administrative positions, and the remainder will retire or pursue nonacademic plans. These data are from a survey of 375 chairs in nine state universities in Florida (6), but similar findings are reported in other studies (7).

There were 56 professional occupational therapy programs in the 1984 American Occupational Therapy Association Listing of Educational Programs (8). Eight (14.3%) of these programs were headed by acting chairs. The attrition rate for chairs in occupational therapy has also been reported to be as high as 20% (9). Most chairs in occupational therapy are female, have held the director position for nearly six years, supervise 6.4 full-time faculty members, and direct a baccalaureate program (10).

**Desirable Characteristics of Chairs**

The ability to work well with people is as important as are administrative skills. In rankings of 14 competencies by 218 chairs in institutions across the United States, personal and human relationship skills ranked as the most important characteristics required of chairs (11). These skills included, in order of most to least important, character/integrity, leadership ability, interpersonal skills, ability to communicate effectively, decision-making skills, and organizational ability. Managerial and administrative skills ranked lower and included, in order, planning skills, professional competency, problem-solving skills, ability to evaluate faculty, program innovation and development, budgeting skills, ability to recruit new faculty members, and fund-raising ability (11). According to this study, it would seem that chairs could be chosen for their personal-social skills and taught the administrative skills.

To become a chair, the faculty member must make several transitions. First, the faculty member who is a specialist in a field of study must become a generalist, viewing issues and tasks from the broad perspective of the entire department and the university. Second, the faculty member's concerns must shift from his or her students, courses, and research projects to the activities of the collective faculty. Third, the faculty member's loyalty to his or her profession must expand to include loyalty to the institution and the implementation of its policies and philosophy (12).

Chairs need to be aware of their own leadership style (5) and their primary role orientation. Bragg (13) has identified four role orientations assumed by department chairs. Chairs with a faculty orientation view faculty development as their primary responsibility. Chairs with a program orientation put their energies into developing excellent programs. Externally oriented chairs are concerned with representation, negotiation, and the obtaining of grants. Finally, management-oriented chairs emphasize efficiency in the running of the department. Ideally, the chair balances these orientations within the constraints of the faculty, institution, profession, and department organization.

**Training of Department Chairs**

Although they play a significant role in the academic institution, most chairs receive no training for the role (5). Chairs are given little
or no orientation; role expectations are not clarified (13). They tend to learn by trial and error, by modeling cohorts in other departments, by imitating their former chairs, and by learning as they go.

Training programs for department chairs have been instituted in many states. Allen Tucker (3) developed a model program in which chairs from various disciplines assemble for discussions, presentations, and problem solving. Topics include the chair’s role, powers, and responsibilities; types of departments; leadership roles; decision making; faculty development; and budgets.

**Worker Functions**

Worker functions are what the worker must do in terms of data, people, and things. Data functions include working with information, ideas, facts, and statistics using the following hierarchy: comparing, copying, computing, compiling, analyzing coordinating, and synthesizing (14). People functions include verbal and nonverbal communication using the following hierarchy: taking instructions and helping, serving, speaking-signaling, persuading, diverting, supervising, instructing, negotiating, and mentoring (14). Functions related to things include interaction with physical, tangible objects using the following hierarchy: handling, feeding-offbearing (inserting or removing material from automated machines), tending, manipulating, driving-operating, operating-controlling, precision working, and setting up (14). This section of the job analysis usually includes methods, techniques, and materials used; products manufactured; services resulting; and a description of tasks as they relate to data, people, and things (1).

Most of a department chair’s functions are in the areas of data and people. Things are dealt with incidentally to data and people functions. Data functions include financial and programs tasks. People functions include working with students, faculty, support personnel, the dean, and other administrators. Things functions relate to department reports, space, and equipment, and to objects used in teaching and research.

**Data Functions**

**Finances.** As chief financial officer of the department, the chair approves purchases, determines salary increments, initiates fund-generating efforts, oversees the bookkeeping, and prepares and justifies budget requests based on existing and anticipated needs. One of the best strategies in dealing with budget matters is being informed. The chair should know how much money will be allocated to the department, when it will be forthcoming, for what it can be spent, the timetable for the requests to be satisfied, and what types of funds will be available (i.e., expense, equipment, or personnel). This information, together with knowledge of existing department needs, enables the chair to make sound fiscal plans.

For the new chair who has little or no experience with financial management, planning and using common sense are practical methods for dealing with financial matters. For example, chairs soon learn that they need to make informed equipment purchases, and to plan for maintenance costs in subsequent annual expense budgets. When funding is allocated at the beginning of the fiscal year, spending must be spaced so that there is money to cover expenses throughout the year. In responding to faculty requests, the chair must consider the overall needs of the faculty and not just the individual needs of the most vocal members. Department budget requests are often solicited by the dean’s office with a short turnaround time. Having faculty members keep an up-to-date “want list” facilitates the compiling of budget requests. These approaches all show common sense, but they may not be obvious to the inexperienced new chair.

Because of declining enrollments, inflation, a reduction in federal government funding, and a no-increase policy in state funding, bankruptcy is threatening higher education (15). In response to dwindling resources chairs have been urged to become entrepreneurs (2) and to be innovative in generating funds from external sources. Universities are collaborating with industry to provide consultation, training courses, joint research efforts, and student trainees in return for funding, equipment, research grants, and other resources (2, 15). In the health fields, the faculty practice plan has developed as a means to generate funds through client services. In addition to generating patient services fees, these plans help faculty members to maintain their clinical skills and to obtain clinical material for use in teaching.

Faculty members may resist tasks aimed at generating funds. Although the need for external support is evident, individuals enter academia because the “profit motive” is not a high priority for them and, in fact, may be distasteful to them as scholars (2). Moreover, generating funds adds another task to faculty members’ role without removing any other responsibilities.

The social systems of academia and industry are disparate. Suc-
cessful mergers will require compromises in both systems. The chair who assumes the role of entrepreneur may be in step with the management of the future, but he or she will need to be fiscally adept and diplomatic in negotiating with industry, the faculty, and the institution.

**Programs.** As the primary administrator of the department, the chair is responsible for the academic programs offered to students. The department exists to provide a specialized academic program. Thus, the activities of a department chair center around the curriculum, the academic programs, and the resources required to carry out those programs.

The chair is responsible for overall curriculum design and evaluation. He or she plans for periodic curriculum revision in keeping with changes in the profession and in response to accreditation or institutional requirements. The chair compiles self-study reports and drafts supporting documents to request program changes. One of the most common obstacles to curriculum revision is the “overstuffed curriculum syndrome,” the tendency to add new material without removing any existing content. In professional degree programs such as those in the allied health fields, compliance of the curriculum with accrediting bodies may present conflicts with institutional policies and resources. An example of such a conflict in therapy would be mandating master’s level entry programs and the problems that this would pose in some academic settings.

Faculty members are the best resource for curriculum planning and revision because they are knowledgeable about the content of the courses they teach. Requiring the entire faculty to participate in curriculum reviews and decisions about curriculum changes is the best way to use the faculty’s expertise. The curriculum review clarifies for each faculty member the scope of the curriculum and allows faculty members to examine their own courses from the perspective of the overall curriculum design. Faculty members can identify what is offered to and required of the individual student.

**People Functions**

**Faculty.** As the primary personnel officer of the department, the chair has an important role in faculty appointments, promotion, tenure, evaluation, and development. The chair is also responsible for the hiring and supervision of secretaries, work study students, graduate assistants, and other support personnel. The chair reports to a dean or other supradepartmental officials.

The chair writes job descriptions based on existing and future needs in the department and in keeping with university policy. He or she initiates the search to fill vacant positions and is a key member of the search process. The chair familiarizes new persons with the department and university and helps incorporate the new member into the existing faculty group.

Faculty development responsibilities include promoting the productivity and scholarly growth of individual faculty members. This may be accomplished through opportunities for continuing education, encouragement to develop scholarly works, and recognition of research efforts. Requiring faculty members to write their own annual objectives is an effective planning strategy for faculty development. This requirement provides faculty members with a guide for planning their own development for the year. If these goals are organized around the institution’s criteria for promotion and tenure (usually teaching, research, and service), the faculty member has a framework for prioritizing his or her efforts in keeping with the institution. Faculty objectives are also useful for the chair’s annual evaluation of the faculty member’s efforts. In preparing annual department reports, the chair can also review these goals for an indication of the collective productivity of the faculty.

The department is a social system; its members play various roles and develop values, norms, and myths (2). The department chair is usually chosen from the faculty; hence he or she is part of the faculty social system. At the same time, however, the chair must interpret to the faculty the institution’s policies, the dean’s directives, and the position of the department in relationship to other departments. In turn, the chair must convey the faculty’s needs and positions to the supradepartmental administration. Being a middle manager, the chair must act in the faculty’s best interest, while adhering to institutional governance (16). Such a position is fertile ground for role conflict for the chair who is both a scholar and a manager (9). As a “leader of peers” (5), the chair must be at once wise, diplomatic, and decisive while walking the tightrope between policy and faculty.

As the persons responsible for imparting and generating knowledge, faculty members determine the quality of a department’s course offerings, curriculum, research program, and student achievements. In the classroom,
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the individual faculty member is entrusted to provide the best academic material possible, and his or her autonomy is ensured by academic freedom policies. The individual faculty member's desire and ability to conduct research and prepare quality scholarly reports ultimately determine how well a department generates and disseminates knowledge. The chair can provide resources for the faculty, but the individual faculty member decides how to use them.

The chair sets the climate of the department primarily through his or her interaction with the faculty. The way a department chair relates to faculty members, the expectations the chair holds for them, and the way the chair communicates these expectations set the overall tone of the department. Chairs with a "faculty orientation" direct their energies toward developing the faculty, facilitating the interactions of the faculty, building a quality faculty, and reducing faculty conflict (13). Optimum productivity and cooperation of each faculty member is promoted. This approach could be especially effective in the six- to seven-member department that is typical in occupational therapy. In a large faculty, one unproductive member might not jeopardize the overall workings of the department, or one unmotivated, uncooperative member might not negatively affect the working relationship of the faculty. However, in a smaller group, the members are interdependent, and the contributions of each member are keenly felt and observed.

Students. The chair daily makes decisions that affect students. These decisions range in importance from setting admissions policy to student conduct issues and the approval of a design for a student lapel pin that bears the institution's name. When there is a question about an individual student's situation, whether it involves admissions, academic performance, or curriculum, the chair makes the decisions.

Since students are the consumers of the academic program, the chair and faculty members should request and use feedback from the students and data about student performance. Student feedback takes many forms: teacher and course evaluations, student representatives to faculty meetings, and graduating students' review of the curriculum. Indicators of student performance include grades, fieldwork assessments and certification examination scores, and employment and career achievements after graduation. This important information can be used in numerous ways for curriculum planning, course design, program changes, and setting priorities for program content. The chair's role as a faculty member provides her or him with valuable experience for making decisions related to student issues.

Support Personnel. Adequate and effective support personnel is vital to a productive department. The chair is responsible for hiring, supervising, and evaluating the performance of these persons. Support personnel type the handouts and manuscripts, operate duplicating equipment, process student records, and perform a myriad of secretarial and clerical duties that make the uninterrupted flow of department processes and procedures possible. Department chairs are responsible for the development of individuals in these roles and for maintaining effective communication between them and the faculty.

Dean. Department chairs are the link between the department and the rest of the university. The Dean tends to view the department chair as an administrator rather than a professional (i.e., occupational therapist) or faculty member (9). Thus, the relationship with the dean centers around institutional policy as implemented at the department level. Department financial, personnel, and program functions concern the dean in terms of how one department fits with the other departments in the dean's unit or within the university as a whole. An effective strategy for working with the dean is to remain informed and make contact with the dean on a regular basis. The dean can have the department's best interest in mind if he or she knows what the needs are. Likewise, the department chair can perform planning functions for the department if she or he is cognizant of the dean's priorities.

Things Functions

Space and Equipment. A program must have proper resources to operate. Faculty and student activities depend on adequate space, equipment, and materials. In addi-
There is a frightening shortage of faculty members in occupational therapy education today, and the shortage of department chairs is equally foreboding.
velop knowledge through research, and promote occupational therapy.

As a profession, occupational therapy needs to recognize the important role of the academic chair and further this role as a specialty area. Therapists need to be made aware of academia as a career possibility. New faculty members need to be advised at the beginning of their academic appointment of the various directions they can pursue, which would include becoming a department chair. Faculty members who are interested in administration should be given opportunities to develop their skills and knowledge in management and administration through continuing education and department activities. Furthermore, occupational therapy students should be introduced to academia as a career possibility. Undergraduate students can learn to appreciate academia as a potential role for therapists, while graduate students can be given specific experiences in academic administration. In short, the profession should promote academic administration as a viable career option for occupational therapy faculty.

Summary

The roles and functions of the occupational therapy academic chair have been discussed using a job analysis format, related literature, and the author’s experiences and viewpoints. The many facets of the chair role have been examined. The challenges were described and strategies for dealing with those challenges were offered. Finally, the need for recognizing the chair role as an important career option in occupational therapy was stressed.

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This article is a tribute to my late friend, colleague, and mentor, Alice C. Jantzen, who founded the occupational therapy program at the University of Florida and chaired it for 18 years. Today, her influence on the program continues with ongoing curriculum revisions, close collegial relationships among faculty members, academic excellence in students, a view of the department in the broader perspective of the university, and a commitment to occupational therapy as a valuable and viable health care service.

Many of the strategies mentioned in this paper were developed during my association with Lela A. Llorens, PhD, OTR, FAOTA, an esteemed academician who developed Jantzen’s philosophy further and who is outstanding in her management of the chair role.

REFERENCES