

# The Academic Department Chair as Transformative Diversity Leader

By Edna Chun and Alvin Evans

In light of the rapidly increasing minority student population in higher education – which doubled between 1976 and 2010, while the number of white students during this same time period declined from 83 percent to 61 percent – the role of academic department chairs in building inclusive learning environments is both urgent and critical. Although department chairs are responsible for much of the academic decision making in colleges and universities, the chair’s influential role in diversity transformation has been largely overlooked. However, with institutional support, the academic department chair has the potential to be the engine of diversity change in higher education.

While HR leaders typically do not hold a seat at the academic decision-making table, development of a strategic human resources approach to the department chair’s diversity role can assist the institution in leveraging its talent strategies in alignment with institutional mission. Given HR’s expertise in organizational change, HR can contribute to the creation of programs and processes that recognize and enhance chairs’ diversity leadership contributions. In addition, HR can assist institutions in the development of search processes and competitive compensation packages that attract and retain diverse and talented department chairs.

Why are department chairs so critical in diversity change? Because they are the linchpins in the “value chain” in the students’ educational progress, leading from classroom experiences, curricular offerings and faculty mentoring to careers in a diverse and global workplace. Operating at the core of the academic value proposition, department chairs are influential leaders in terms of departmental climate, educational outcomes and faculty hiring, promotion and retention. They also set the tone for an inclusive departmental environment that can advance the access and success of diverse students.

### Barriers to Diversity Change

Diversity change agent is unquestionably a complex and demanding role for department chairs. They must

navigate the complex administrative and faculty worlds and negotiate the boundaries between these two often-conflicting domains. Faced with limited budgetary resources and numerous time-consuming administrative responsibilities, they may have little opportunity to pursue diversity hiring or negotiate curricular change. Frequently elected or selected from the faculty ranks for a limited term, department chairs often may not yield sufficient power or authority to insist on a common pathway and frequently must navigate through negotiation, influence and persuasion. They can face internal resistance to diversity change and may have to surmount divisive factions in the department.

Rapid turnover in the provost’s and dean’s roles compounds the difficulty in obtaining needed support for diversity initiatives or sustaining a consistent diversity course. From a political standpoint, department chairs can encounter neutrality on the dean’s part with regard to diversity or even a desire to shift the blame when situations do not turn out as expected.

Furthermore, diversity resistance can be attributable to a backward algorithm in which diversity is seen as an end, rather than a means to an end. Far too often, search committees see diversity and quality as antithetical and object to a diversity recruiting focus. In countering the pushback that results from this perspective, a white male psychology chair in a Midwestern urban university explains his approach to faculty hiring:

I was pushing us to consider the importance of diversity, and one of the things I did to promote diversity as a positive, value-add attribute was provide our faculty with data to show that groups that are diverse actually make more effective decisions than groups that are not diverse. It’s not just diversity for diversity’s sake. Making your faculty more diverse will improve the quality of faculty and the quality of decision making of the group.

Similarly, a white male chair of modern languages and literatures in a religious-affiliated university observes the

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tendency of faculty to become immersed in disciplinary specialization and be reluctant to engage in what he terms “border-crossing” dialogue:

Even though we are a department where one might expect great diversity of outlook, support for multiculturalism and a focus on intercultural understanding, many tenure-track faculty are ensconced in a narrow view of disciplinary specialization. They are generally unwilling to engage in genuine border-crossing dialogue or thought (either cross-cultural or cross-disciplinary).

And consider the perspective of a white male chair of educational leadership in one research university who summarizes the challenges chairs face in moving forward in substantive ways to address diversity. While there is a lot of talk about diversity, multiculturalism and social justice at his university, he sees these terms used as buzzwords and not as a way of approaching work. As he explains:

I feel a little bit conflicted about it in terms of how to move forward. It's going to take guts; it's going to take some people retiring; it's going to take some people finding their voice and their courage to stand up and say things. There's a lot of talking and I don't see much action yet.

## Facilitating the Chair's Role as Change Agent

The higher education literature has been largely silent in terms of the department chair's role in building a diverse department, and few chair guides even touch upon diversity. In our recent study, *The Department Chair as Transformative Diversity Leader: Building Inclusive Learning Environments in Higher Education*, we draw upon findings from an extensive survey and interview sample to highlight common barriers to the chair's diversity role and present practical strategies for instigating and sustaining change.

Given the relatively small percentage of chairs from non-dominant groups, we particularly focus on the differential challenges faced by minority, female and LGBT chairs. Since the predominant demographic makeup of the department chair tier is still largely white, the small number of minority chairs is a matter of ongoing concern due to the need for role models and mentors for diverse student populations and the importance of the chair role as a potential pipeline to the dean position.

Among key recommendations in our study of particular importance for the development of institution-wide HR and diversity strategies are the following:

**Recognize department chairs who have made outstanding contributions in the area of diversity.** The Committee on Diversity and Cultural Competence of the faculty senate of the 64 campuses of the State University of New York has called for policy changes in the faculty reward and evaluation system to recognize diversity.

**Create a nucleus of department chairs for participation in diversity planning at the institutional level.** Small groups of chairs from different disciplines can recommend concrete strategies that enhance the link between educational mission and the access and success of diverse students.

## Development of a strategic human resources approach to the department chair's diversity role can assist the institution in leveraging its talent strategies in alignment with institutional mission.

**Actively seek greater representation of individuals from non-dominant groups in the department chair role.**

Until universities and colleges develop a critical mass of chairs from non-dominant groups including women, minority, LGBT and disabled faculty, academic leadership will fail to realize a representative academic infrastructure that addresses the needs of a diverse student body.

**Address department chair compensation through benchmarking with peer institutions.** Due to the complex leadership role that chairs face and the often limited rewards that accompany this responsibility, institutions need to reconsider the compensation process so that faculty will be willing to assume this demanding role.


**Provide finely tuned programs for department chair and faculty development that offer research-based approaches to diversity leadership.** Our study indicates a dearth of programs devoted to chair development as well as programs that address the chair's role in diversity. The American Council on Education offers a year-long

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Leadership Academy for chairs that includes diversity and leadership among its topics. Jossey-Bass offers online resources through its Department Chair Leadership Institute and also publishes a quarterly newsletter, *The Department Chair*.

### Transforming the Diversity Landscape

Since academic department chairs represent a critical lever in diversity transformation, HR practitioners can partner with academic and diversity leaders to enhance processes and programs that strengthen department chairs' diversity leadership roles. In particular, the areas of recruitment and outreach, compensation, rewards and recognition and professional development offer the opportunity for collaborative talent strategies. Diversity in the department chair ranks is an essential first step and a clear signal of organizational commitment.

Chair leadership is critical to ensuring that students have the competencies, knowledge and expertise needed for success in a global, interconnected society. Recognition of the academic department chair's leadership role in diversity will not only accelerate the process of institutional transformation, but will also ensure the continued responsiveness and relevance of a college education to the rapidly changing demands of the 21st-century workplace. 

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