

Reactions to Netflix's *The Chair*

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Thanks to Netflix and its limited series *The Chair*, the role of the department chair is now better understood by the general public. Or is it? *The Chair* follows a fictional newly minted department chair sharing her trials and tribulations, along with a good dose of drama, all aimed at a general audience with little to no exposure to academic leadership. But what does *The Chair* actually reveal about university departmental leadership? And what are the *real* issues driving the drama that ring true and have now been laid out for all to see?

The symbolic opening scene of the newly appointed chair walking into her newly assigned office and sitting down at a well-used desk chair that crumbles as soon as she does so is an omen of future doom for the new administrator. The symbolism is obvious and straightforward; just like the office chair itself, the new chair will also collapse in carrying out her duties. What challenges should any new chair become aware of so that they don't meet the same fate?

Using Netflix's *The Chair* as our framework, we discuss three evident challenges that most department leaders face, regardless of their race and gender, that even the general public can now understand and sympathize with.

Challenge 1: Leading without Authority

In an academic department, virtually all decisions must be negotiated. Department chairs can never tell faculty what to do; they have to convince them to do it. Anyone who has held the chair position can surely empathize with the Netflix chair who became so frustrated with a faculty member that she grabs him by the shoulders and yells at him to “get his s*** together.” However satisfying as it may seem, this type of action may be appropriate for TV shows but could never

happen in a real-life department. Leading without authority means that while the chair is responsible and accountable to the dean for what faculty say or do or fail to do, she has no actual power to control them.

Suppose a faculty member violates the institutional, college, or departmental code of conduct, as was illustrated in *The Chair*. In that case, the chair's next steps require collaboration with other offices (e.g., human resources, equity, and inclusive excellence) and the dean to create a plan for behavioral

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correction. The lack of the chair's authority rarely dissuades the typical dean, other faculty, and students from demanding that the chair correct faculty behavior or even dismiss violators. This disconnect between responsibility and authority was clearly seen in *The Chair* when students demanded the immediate dismissal of a faculty member. The Netflix chair found herself in an untenable position. While she sympathized with her faculty member's pedagogical choice where a hand gesture was mistakenly attributed to him being a Nazi, she lacked the power to compel him to apologize, the ability to convince students that he was not a Nazi, or the critical consciousness to positively address the incident with restorative actions. Instead, flaws in the process of university protocol resulted in her ultimate

undoing and a no-confidence vote by her faculty.

Challenge 2: Living in Two Worlds: Being Both Colleague and Leader (and Feeling Like Neither)

The Netflix series fails to accurately or thoroughly portray how department chairs are appointed or elected. The nonacademic audience likely assumes that moving from a professor to a chair is a highly sought-after promotion. Indeed, the professors in the series all portrayed a desire to become the new chair. Moreover, the public likely believes that “promotion” to chair is similar to promotions outside of academe; taking on a higher position means leaving the old job behind. Also probably assumed is that a promotion is a permanent move. In other words, in the outside world, when people are promoted, they leave their old job behind and assume a new one—never to return. However, members of academia know the truth. Becoming a chair means adding administrative responsibilities to one's current faculty role. In theory, the chair remains a colleague to the faculty while also adding the supervisory role. The addition of administrative duties is not always desired and can be viewed as a burden, and most faculty do not want to take on the position.

When faculty members become the chair, colleagues view them differently. The chair must avoid even the appearance of favoritism toward specific colleagues. Invitations to lunch or an afterwork beer often diminish. The chair no longer fits within the faculty circle, feeling trapped in a netherworld with one foot in the faculty sphere and the other within the administration while navigating both worlds and not disrupting the balance. It's exhausting, thankless work, where previously valued relationships can dissipate in an instant.

Throughout the series, viewers saw depictions of the chair caught in the middle trying to implement her dean's plans while also placating individuals who used to be her colleagues and friends. In the series, the chair navigated her “leadership role,” explaining to her colleagues why the dean's choice for a lecture fellowship award was

more suitable than their in-house current faculty star, who everyone knew was far more worthy. All the while, the chair knew in her heart that if someone else was the chair and advocated for the same issue, she would have joined her colleagues and dug in her heels just as deeply as they did. The Netflix chair, just like most other department chairs, had to face the fact that she was caught between being a member of the faculty and being an administrator while also being viewed as a colleague.

Challenge 3: Serving at the Pleasure of the Dean While Avoiding the No-Confidence Vote

Chairs must accept the transient nature of the position. Eventually, most department chairs return to the faculty and must resume the role of a colleague among people who may hold a grudge or two. Chairs serve at the pleasure of the dean and can be dismissed for any number of reasons. Tenure may protect the faculty role, but the chair comes with no protections. At the same

time, the faculty can issue a no-confidence vote, forcing the chair to step down and back to the faculty to try to recreate former collegial relationships.

Adding to the other aforementioned challenges, this one explains why most faculty do not desire to become chair. The series ends with the chair feeling unappreciated, misunderstood, and mistreated by her dean while also receiving her colleagues' no-confidence vote. The first season of this series appears to have a happy ending in which the chair reassumes her former faculty role while relieved to be unburdened of the challenges. The new chair, a rather elderly faculty member rife with her own agenda, is seen taking the role. The viewer is left wondering if there is a second season of this limited series, will it feature the failure of this new chair?

The Broken Chair

The Netflix series clearly implied that happiness is leaving the chair position and returning to the faculty. Thus, the viewer

is reminded of the actual and the symbolic broken office chair. The general public may have been amused and may have learned something of the role of the academic department chair. But for us, active participants in the process, it is not entertainment. We conclude with the knowledge that the job of a department chair comes with many challenges. We see the need for targeted professional development and perhaps some systemic change that would support chairs avoiding actual and symbolic collapse. ▲

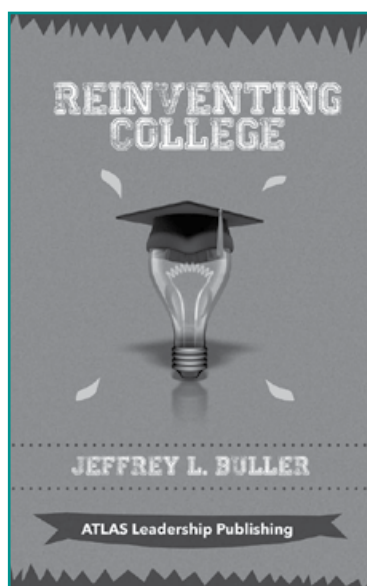
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