Reflections from an Untenured Chair: Myths and Realities

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Abstract: This is a narrative account of a journey of an individual who earned tenure while in the role of departmental chair at a teaching institution. Reflections on the decision to take the position are discussed, as well as reasons and insights as to how tenure was successfully earned. Struggles in the classroom and student relationships were unique. Lastly, insight is offered for those in similar situations and connections to social work practice are made.

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In 2011, with only three years of full-time academic experience, I accepted an external position as untenured chair of a social work department. My career in social work academia was going well at the time. I had a full-time faculty position in social work at a university that did not have a tenure system. I was certainly happy enough, but then a colleague approached me and asked if I would apply to her university (a teaching institution) for a position as incoming chair of the department of six faculty and four administrators.

I needed to make a tough decision. Do I take a departmental chair offer in a tenure track position? Not the best position to be in, for sure! My friends and colleagues around the country were shocked when I took it. Some of the common reactions I received were "What, are you crazy?" and "Oh boy, good luck!"

Had I lost any sensibility? Because I was hired from the outside meant I was unfamiliar with campus operations, the culture of the school, the students, processes, and procedures. The MSW program is jointly accredited with the other main campus of the university and resulted in an extra learning curve. Each campus ran completely autonomously, such as separate admissions departments and differing academic calendars. Coordinating with this collaborative program increased the workload tremendously. To further complicate things on a personal level, I am a 38 year-old woman who is an ethnic minority with only three years of full-time academic experience as a faculty member.

One reading this may be thinking, "Why did they hire someone with your lack of experience?" Truth be told, the founding chair of fourteen years had stepped down, and no other faculty member was willing to assume the role. To my credit, I did have experience as an agency and program administrator during my direct social service days. My experience in those positions did give me confidence that I was an able administrator. Although it is my opinion that having administrative experience isn't absolutely necessary, I found that for myself it did prove useful for two reasons: first, in managing a department; and second, it also just gave me the confidence to even pursue the opportunity.

So I accepted the offer as an untenured chair. I had just the right mix of youthful energy, ambition, and naiveté to give it a shot. It also felt like the next step for me. I was conditioned into believing that earning tenure, and everything that goes with that, was the gold standard of being a successful academic. When I was on the job market that year, I declined other offers because they were outside of social work and did not seem like a fit for me. So, it wasn't that I WANTED to be a chair, but rather simple, this was the best position available to achieve tenure. Thus, I took this position with optimism that everything would work out (one way or another!).

Although I was optimistic and hopeful, I still had major concerns and anxiety about potential scenarios. Before starting, I had three major concerns. First off, I was starting a new job, and of course there was the usual apprehension of change. Secondly, I was concerned that my very ambition would be my undoing. I would eventually have to make decisions that would be deemed unpopular by the same people that would eventually decide on my tenure and promotion. Thirdly, I was concerned about having the time to publish.

But my fears were steadily relieved throughout the three years I was chair. For the most part, people welcomed me and were willing to experience some change. In addition, three of the four other department

chairs within my school were also untenured, so it was considered more of a natural transition for new faculty as opposed to an anomaly involving some "wet behind the ears" upstart.

More importantly, I had the support of a dean who backed me in every situation. He provided me with whatever I needed to succeed in my scholarship and in my role as chair. He also presented a united front with me in working with members of my department and with the campus that we had a collaborative program. And of course, he literally supported all my reappointments.

Also, with some strategic planning, I was able to remain productive in my scholarship. Because the department was small, there weren't any other faculty members with similar scholarly interests as mine, which looking back may have been fortunate. I collaborated with individuals outside my department and university, which again, provided clear boundaries between my scholarship and those who were deciding on my tenure. I worked collaboratively with some wonderful colleagues outside the university that would yield a number of different manuscripts.

Planning studies that would yield several manuscripts from one study with different people taking the lead as first author proved to be an effective way of generating scholarship. All told, our partnerships yielded thirteen articles in three years. Another reason for my productivity and eventual earning of tenure was that I was realistic in my scholarship. I know of many newly minted doctoral graduates not having the confidence that their work is worthwhile and therefore paralyzed to produce at all. I didn't let this stop me.

I knew that stellar research takes years and years of work and preliminary data and articles, so I just went for it, with the realization that some manuscripts were stronger than others. So some I submitted to higher-end journals, and for some manuscripts I pursued less rigorous journals. In addition to research-based manuscripts, I also capitalized on other areas to publish in, such as a reflective teaching piece (Wang, 2012), and a few other theory-based articles. These articles, which are valued by my teaching institution as scholarship, allowed me to write in my own time pace, as they were not reliant on upon collecting or analyzing data. Hopefully, this type of scholarship earns the merit it deserves for all. Boyer (2000) describes it as a need for "scholarship revisited", in that the faculty reward system does not match the full range of academic responsibilities, and that scholarship does not just include "discovery" (or what we typically call research), but there is also scholarship of integration and teaching.

Unlike what many untenured chairs believe (Williams, 2006), I do think my untenured status affected my decision-making with regards to the battles I chose. I would put some volatile or controversial things on the back burner and only choose what was really critical. In retrospect, the humility I brought as being a new untenured chair ironically helped me be a better administrator.

One of the most difficult aspects of the position was balancing the roles of chair and teacher. One drawback in holding a chair position (tenured or not) that I did not expect was the feeling of disconnect from the students. With reduced teaching and increased dealing with students' issues, the rewarding aspects of getting to know and mentor students were minimized. This, in the end, was another reason why I chose to return to regular faculty. A chairing colleague from another school told me she didn't teach at all. She focused solely on administrative duties, as she felt the leap from administration to teaching was too much of a stretch. I personally agree, and this is even more difficult untenured. The difficulties proved to be for both the students and me.

The first challenge arose around role boundaries. It was an ongoing struggle to keep the classroom as an instructional environment, rather than a forum for students to "vent" to the chair. I knew that class time should not be taken to vent individual administrative and academic issues. However, the students' concerns still needed to be addressed in a way that they felt heard. So I reinforced office hours, and redirected concerns to email communication and discussions after class. These measures helped me earn the respect of the students as both a chair and teacher.

A more subtle issue for the students is the potential conflict of interest that may arise around having the departmental chair as your instructor. There is an obvious conflict if students feel they have no recourse

if problems arise with me as a teacher. Also, the ability to separate out interactions as chair, particularly disciplinary actions, may have been difficult for the students involved. There was one instance when a student placed on academic probation successfully grieved the decision, and then had me for a teacher. Also, a student with numerous complaints about fieldwork and needed multiple interventions from me as chair eventually became one of my students.

Although we never had open discussions about either of these situations, I can imagine that in general, some students may have felt somewhat nervous that I would hold past "transgressions" against them. Did I? I don't think I did, but I certainly looked at my roster and saw their names with an unwarranted bias. This is understandable when you consider that they were linked to "negative" circumstances. In other words, as chair, I only saw some of these students "at their worst" or, at least, under duress. In these cases, as an instructor, I did my very best to try to leave the administrative issues at the door of the classroom and tried my very best to engage them in a learning environment and build a relationship as a teacher-student. I think I was successful. On the personal development side, my perspective of them became more balanced as I got to know these students in a more "positive" environment.

There are two reasons I am happy that I was able to teach a few classes while chair. First, it helped me remain connected to the student body and also as aforementioned, not just see students "at their worst." Second, it was a way of keeping my ear to the ground. For example, I would overhear students mention in passing that an instructor didn't show up for class. Having this type of information, that I may not have normally received, made me a better administrator.

To be an effective manager, one needs to know a person's strengths and weakness – including your own. For example, I am an expedient and efficient organizer and good at working with people. I had brought stability to the department, and I grew it from six to eight faculty. However, I saw myself as a transitional leader – not a visionary leader to take the department to the next level. With this in mind, I stepped down from the chair position after my 3-year cycle was over, which happened to coincide with when I was going up for tenure since I negotiated a shorter 3-year tenure clock. It all worked out: A more senior person now felt more comfortable stepping into the chair since the department was more stable. And I received tenure!!!

If you are considering this route yourself, only you can discern whether it is plausible for you. Please know that the second year is easier than the first (Beall, 2003). Hand-in-hand with knowing one's strengths and weaknesses, I agree with Beall (2003) to do a careful assessment of your own personal needs as well as the department's. If there are some needs or upcoming situations for the department that may be untenable, then either decline the appointment or take it up at a future point in time when things may be more secure for everyone. So for example, if there is a known possibility of a change in dean or another substantial change such as a merger with another department, you might not want to enter such precarious and unpredictable conditions. As far as taking stock of your own personal needs, negotiate what you need upon hire, such as a shortened tenure clock or reduction in scholarship expectations. Also, I found self-care to be critical. Between chairing a department and trying to earn tenure, for my own sanity, I made sure I did not lose sight of family and friends, and also frequently engaged in several self-care techniques, such as yoga, meditation, acupuncture and massage.

I share this all because these are issues that are not often talked about in social work, especially in doctoral programs. Doctoral programs often focus on research and the need to publish, but neglect the realities of teaching and administration of social work programs. And I believe administrative responsibilities will become more and more common within social work programs and in higher education in general. It may be increasingly common that heads of departments are untenured as more and more institutions are or are trying to abolish a tenure system or decreasing the number of tenured lines. Jacobson (2002) stated that institutions have lost senior faculty to retirement, but budget constraints have prevented institutions from replacing those lines, thus shrinking the pool of potential department heads.

Further, academics are often not trained or interested in some demands in higher administration, such as

recruitment and retention, outcome assessment and graduation rates. I certainly heard this from older, more senior professors outside of my department that I interacted with for various reasons. For example, as departmental chair, I would often attend meetings with other chairs on campus. Many of these were at the university for twenty or thirty years, and were male, white and tenured. There were occasions when they shared their curiosity as to why I was hired, if I was qualified enough, and where did I stand on issues for which they fought. Was I going to be representative of a changing status quo? Would I be the one who would agree to take on areas such as outcome assessment and make them look bad? In situations like these, I would dance the dance lightly, and hope that I did not irritate anyone that might have the power to impact a promotion recommendation at the university level.

I am very grateful for the experience of having been an untenured chair. I constantly made use of my social work skills, such as advocating, negotiating, brokering and educating. In fact, being an untenured chair is really not that much different than being an administrator of a non-profit agency. And as I stated, bringing this experience certainly helped me to understand dynamics more quickly than if I didn't have administrative experience. People are still people no matter where you go, and human nature is human nature. Learning what is important to them, drawing on their strengths and making them feel utilized and appreciated holds true across any management position.

Having learned this earlier in my career enabled me to capitalize on this knowledge sooner rather than later and resulted in my concerns about being untenured being quickly replaced by a focus on being a good leader for the welfare of the department and the students. When it's less about being tenured, people can't threaten you with something that's not important to you. I was confident that if I did not earn tenure, that I had the credentials and skills to move to another institution if necessary. The irony is that I was concerned that being chair would be the biggest risk to becoming tenured, and in the end it was the biggest asset. The whole experience has been a tremendous learning opportunity. I developed different leadership skills and experience within higher education. I also believe it has increased my marketability should I ever want to start another chapter in my academic career.

Writing this piece has really been a tool for reflection and processing! Being reflective is important to me in all aspects of my life (I wrote a piece in the journal *Reflective Practice* about my teaching philosophy; Wang, 2012), which helps bring balance and clarity to my work. I think this may be one of the most critical personal traits that made me a successful chair. One other thing that I think can lead to effective chairing is acting as a buffer between faculty needs and the administration's agenda. Again, it's attempting to ensure everyone's needs and opinions are heard. Also, invaluable social work skills that we teach are applicable here as well, such as drawing on strengths and acting in appropriate roles when necessary, such as an educator, advocate or broker. These are not the only skills that would lead to effective chairing. However, they are what worked for me and my personality, experience and life orientation. I couldn't recommend an untenured chair position with certainty unless that person has developed a general "game plan," and I don't mean just in scholarship. Regardless of what it is, each person might want to devise a stance, philosophical orientation, and try to remain flexible.

In terms of personal needs, I think the only way I survived was by developing a strong meditation practice. For my practice, this means two hours daily and taking regular courses that required 10-days of complete disconnect from work with no access to email, phone or other communication. My dean supported it, which was fortunate because it was non-negotiable for me. Hadn't it been for my practice, I may have not been able to do the job – certainly not as well. So in line with assessing your own personal and professional needs, make sure this very critical aspect of yourself isn't neglected. Whatever it is that is going to help balance your mind is too important to sacrifice.

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