In the Hot Seat:
Experiences of Faculty Members Adjusting to
the Role of Department Chair

by

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Abstract

This study examined the lived experiences of faculty members in a post-secondary institution who had become the Chair of their department. The purpose of the study was to explore how the experience had affected the individuals professionally and personally and to provide a reference for other instructors considering applying for the role of Chair in the future. The research triangulated the literature on the subject, the researcher’s personal experience as an instructor-turned-Chair, and the findings from interviews with six former or current Chairs at Vancouver Island University. The interviewees were asked a series of 10 questions designed to elicit responses based on three main themes: 1) motivation and rewards for a teacher taking on the role of Chair, 2) the main differences between teaching and administrating and the difficulties encountered, and 3) lessons learned and advice for others contemplating taking on the role. It was hypothesized that those who transition from instructing to administrating share common motivating reasons, encounter many of the same type of differences, and experience similar difficulties as well as rewards. The results of the investigation confirmed the hypotheses and all of the Chairs viewed the experience as challenging, but very positive, and highly recommended it to other instructors.

Key words: instructor, Chair, adjustment, transition, phenomenological study, role, identity, motivation, rewards, differences, difficulties, lessons learned, advice, post-secondary
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Chapter One: Introduction

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to examine the lived experiences of faculty members in a post-secondary institution who had transitioned from teaching to administrating, specifically, to become the Chair of their department. Why had these instructors taken on this new and challenging role in their departments? What had they found to be the main differences between this role and teaching? What difficulties had they encountered? What were the rewards? What had they learned from it? These are some of the questions that arose from my research of the literature on transitioning from instruction to administration. By examining the experience through the lens of three themes in particular, the study explored how the experience had affected the individuals professionally and personally and provides a reference for other instructors considering taking on this role in the future. The themes were: 1) motivation and rewards for a teacher taking on the role of Chair, 2) the main differences between teaching and administrating and the difficulties encountered, and 3) lessons learned and advice for others contemplating taking on the role.

Furthermore, as I am in my fourth year as the Faculty Chair of the English Language Centre (ELC), often referred to as the “ESL department,” in the Faculty of International Education at Vancouver Island University (VIU), this study was an opportunity for me to reflect on how this experience of having transitioned from instructing to administrating has affected me and to better understand it for myself, or more accurately, to make sense of it as it has been both a uniquely exhilarating and bewildering experience. I wanted to confront the realities of the
challenges and to clarify the benefits. Additionally, I wanted to investigate to what extent my experience has been consistent with, or different from, the experiences of others.

Before I became the Chair, I was an instructor in the ELC for 13 years, and prior to that, I had taught English in the United States and Japan for over 20 years. Although I can say that teaching is my first love, I have also had rewarding experiences in this administrative role; yet, as interesting and stimulating as these experiences have been, I have to admit that this period of my career has been the most stressful. Teaching has always seemed to come naturally to me, but administrating was something I had to learn from scratch and adapt to mindfully. Living this struggle of transitioning from instructor to administrator deeply affected me as I began to examine my effectiveness as an educator, a communicator, a team-player—roles which I had always considered to be at the heart of my self-identity. Now, I was questioning even that. It was tough. I wondered, is it just me, or have others, particularly my colleagues at VIU, experienced the same, or at least a similar phenomenon?

Along with documenting this transformative experience, another important goal of this study was to demystify the responsibilities of the role so as to encourage other instructors in the ELC to consider applying for it. According to the B.C. Government Employees Union (BCGEU), the union to which instructors in the ELC belong, a Chair appointment in the ELC is a full-time release position of two years with, based upon mutual agreement between the individual and the Director of the ELC, two one-year potential extensions (Collective Agreement, BCGEU, 2014). In contrast, according to the Vancouver Island University Faculty Association (VIUFA), the academic program Chair positions at VIU are part-time release based on the FTE appointment and do not carry time limits (The Collective Agreement, VIUFA, 2014). The ELC Chair position started out as a 0.4 FTE release position and is now full-time; since the
role was created, five instructors, including myself, have held it. The ELC offers various rotating release positions and it would appear that the Chair position is not one in high demand. When I applied for it four years ago, only one other instructor had applied for that competition, and I learned from my predecessors that no one else had applied when they did. I believe more instructors should consider applying for this leadership position. Learning more about the systems, the issues, and the pressures behind the scenes that drive many administrative decisions would help them better understand the decisions that eventually affect their teaching practice. With the declining enrollment of ESL students and thus, the increasing frequency of instructor layoffs, along with the growing need for support for international students in academic courses at VIU, it is critical in these dynamic, but turbulent times for the ELC that instructors have a better understanding of issues that confront administrators managing the role the Centre plays in the Faculty of International Education. Administrative decisions ultimately affect instructors directly and the more instructors who understand the operations of the department from a wider point of view (i.e., not from just their own classroom experience), the more voices of reason we will have in making informed decisions together going forward.

I believe instructors can best learn that perspective by actually experiencing an administrative role, even if just temporarily or occasionally. David Kolb’s theory of the experiential learning process developed in the 1980s supports the notion that people learn by doing. Kolb even defined learning as “the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience” (1984, p. 38). I have found that most instructors are life-long learners, but I assume one reason many do not aspire to take on an administrative role is that they think it would feel too foreign to them. I suspect too, as ironic or implausible as this may sound, that many teachers are actually introverts, and do not consider themselves as having strong
leadership skills. But, I am convinced most would find that they too could adapt to this role if only they understood it better. It is my hope that this study will debunk false assumptions and contribute to a clearer understanding of this unique leadership opportunity.

**Justification of the Study**

The importance of the role of Chair in a post-secondary institution warrants a comprehensive and in-depth investigation into the reality of the experience, acknowledging the challenges along with the benefits. Not only does the role provide an invaluable service to the students, instructors, administrators, and staff, it affords a tremendous in-house opportunity for professional and personal growth to the individual who takes it on. Research suggests it is a common sentiment among faculty members who have worked as administrators that administration opens one’s mind to a much broader workplace experience (Jacobe, 2013; Loder & Spillane, 2005; Matos, 2015; Workman, 1998). The ELC Chair, for example, is expected to work with other administrators and with committees across campus and beyond, which expands their involvement in school life outside the ELC—a department somewhat isolated from many of the academically focused aspects of the university due to the developmental, preparatory, non-credit programs it offers. As Chair, I have been invited to serve on a wide range of working groups such as selection committees, advisory groups, and policy reform task forces. Involvement in such initiatives can both stimulate and satisfy the curiosity of an instructor who desires to know what is going on in their work environment beyond their classroom, why it is going on, how things work, who to consult to make things happen, and what might be happening in the future.

To adjust to this transformative way of being, a Chair needs to develop the *mindset* of an administrator. In *We are all Leaders*, Armander (2013) distinguished between a “formal leader”
(one who has responsibility) and a “mindset leader,” (one who takes responsibility) emphasizing, as the subtitle of the book suggests, “Leadership is not a position, it’s a mindset.” I have come to realize from my experience as Chair that recognizing, accepting, and developing the mindset of an administrator may be the most important factor in adjusting to the change in roles from teacher to administrator. By triangulating insights from my own experience as Faculty Chair of the ELC, the experiences of other Chairs at VIU, and literature on the subject, this phenomenological study attempts to provide insight into the experience of faculty members who made the journey of adopting this new mindset.

For this study, insights into the experiences of other Chairs were extracted through individual interviews. As Fontanella, Campos, and Turanto (2006) noted, qualitative methods of research, such as interviewing, not only explain a phenomenon, but what the phenomenon meant to the person who experienced it. The essence of this study is to understand this adjustment from the point of view of those who experienced it; therefore, interviews were deemed to be the most appropriate research method for this research, and as a result, this study provides authentic testimony as to the challenges and benefits of making this transition.

**Research Question and Hypotheses**

Extensive research on the subject of adjusting from teaching to administrating has been made, but literature on the specific experience of adjusting to the role of Chair is limited. Given the challenges of my own experience, I felt it was an important research question to ask, “What are the experiences of university Faculty members adjusting to the role of Department Chair?” and to that end, I compared and contrasted my own experience with the current literature on the subject and with the experiences of other Chairs at VIU. I interviewed six former or current Chairs, three of whom were former Chairs of the ELC, and three others who are currently
serving as Chairs in other Faculties. I wanted to know why they had aspired to this position in the first place and whether or not the new experience had met their expectations. What had surprised them? What had challenged them? What had they learned from it and what advice could they pass on to others? And, as mentioned regarding the purpose of the study, I also wanted to know how similar or different their experiences were from mine. My hypotheses were that most of us, if not all of us, would have shared some of the same reasons for taking on the role, that we would have encountered many of the same struggles, but that we would have also enjoyed many of the same aspects of the work as well; however, given the diversity of their Faculty environments, I did not know what commonalities we might share. In addition, I was not sure as to how positively they would consider the experience, but I predicted that, nonetheless, they would be able to offer valuable recommendations to others interested in making the move.

**Definition of Terms**

The research took place at Vancouver Island University (VIU) among different Faculties. The term “faculty” (with a lower case “f”) refers to “faculty members,” the instructional employees within a “Faculty” (with a capital “F”), which refers to the body of instructional employees (professors and instructors) and non-instructional employees, that is, “administrators” (managers or supervisors such as Deans, Associate Deans, or Directors) and “support staff” (Administrative Assistants or Receptionists). The term “Department” indicates an instructional subdivision of a Faculty. “Chair” refers to a Faculty Chair, not a Research Chair.

VIU employees work in a unionized environment. The “Collective Agreement” (CA) means the contract under which union members (professors and instructors) and the employer (VIU) have agreed to as the terms of employment. Based on its history as a college with vocational training, and a commitment to embracing both academic and trades programs, VIU
instructors are members of the bargaining units of two unions depending on what courses they teach: the “Vancouver Island University Faculty Association (VIUFA)” for faculty members teaching academic courses, and the “British Columbia Government Employees Union (BCGEU)” for those teaching career preparation, developmental, or trades programs. In the context of this study, “faculty member” will mean an instructor who is a member of either VIUFA or BCGEU, or both. The VIUFA Collective Agreement refers to a full-time faculty member as a “professor” and a part-time faculty member as an “instructor,” whereas, the BCGEU Collective Agreement refers to a faculty member as an “instructor,” (or someone in an equivalent position such as a release, non-instructional appointment) and distinguishes between “Regular,” “Term,” and “Auxiliary” faculty members depending on the appointment status. In both unions, Chairs remain faculty members, but they are given “release time,” that is, time to perform non-instructional duties. Some Chairs are on “full release” under a “1.0 FTE (Full-Time Equivalent) appointment,” while others are on “part-time release” at varying FTE appointments.

In the context of this study, the term “experience” refers to the phenomenon of adjusting from teaching as a university instructor or professor to working as the Chair of one’s department, either part-time or full-time. I accessed and explored this experience through the questions stemming from the themes of this study: motivation, rewards, differences, difficulties, and lessons learned.

**Brief Overview of the Study**

This phenomenological study used a qualitative research method to describe the experience of faculty members adjusting to the role of Department Chair. Through individual interviews, it examined the experiences of six current or former Chairs at VIU. Each interview lasted approximately one hour and each participant was asked the same set of ten questions
designed to explore the themes of motivation for teaching as well as for taking on the role of Chair and the rewards experienced; differences between the roles of instructors and administrators and the difficulties encountered; and lessons they had learned as well as advice they were able to pass on.
Chapter 2: Literature Review

Introduction

This study examined the experience of educators who transitioned from teaching to administrating and examined the findings through the lens of three main themes that emerged from a review of the current literature on the subject: motivation and rewards, differences and difficulties, and lessons learned. The research was drawn from both qualitative and quantitative studies, and then triangulated with my own experience as Chair of my department, and with interviews with three former and three current Chairs at VIU as discussed in Chapter 4.

Motivation and Rewards

A common response from a group of teachers interviewed by the National Education Association (NEA) (2017) on their reason for becoming a teacher was that they wanted to make a difference in their students’ lives. This sentiment also appears to be a driving motivation for teachers aspiring to an administrative position, albeit not only to make a difference for students, but for other teachers as well. The motivation is not likely monetary gain as a report by The American Association of School Administrators (AASA), also affiliated with the Canadian Association of School Administrators (CASA), showed that while teacher salaries are notoriously low compared to those of other university-trained professionals, administrators earn only marginally more (Forsyth, 2017). This is particularly true for a Chair because, according to the Collective Agreements of both the BCGEU (2014) and VIUFA (2014), Chairs are still categorized as faculty and as such, there is no change to their salary other than, in some cases, a stipend; however, stipends are granted for the specific purpose of compensating for overtime work.
For some Chairs, the role seems to fall to them because no one else in their department would step up to do it, that their Dean asked them to do it, or that “it was their turn.” However, for those who intentionally apply, a strong motivation tends to be a desire to contribute to the student experience in a new and challenging way (Chu, 2012, p. 3). From her experience of having transitioned from teacher to administrator, Jacobe (2013) noted that both teachers and administrators want what is best for students, but the work of a teacher and the work of an administrator in making that delivery is very different. She explained,

As a faculty member, I was focused chiefly on what went on in my classroom . . . balancing teaching, research, and service to the best of my ability . . . I was giving students what was “best” . . . As an administrator, however, . . . my perspective on what it means to do what’s best for students doesn’t begin in classrooms; it begins with the structure behind the scenes that makes the campus run. Are the right offices talking to each other to make things happen? Is there a bottleneck somewhere that prevents things from happening as they should? I don’t have to be concerned with every office in every division, but because my work serves students differently, I have to worry about and make decisions about things that aren’t the centerpiece of education the way classroom teaching is, but that have real impact on students’ educational experience (p. 1-2).

The prospect of working behind the scenes to bring about positive change in a school environment speaks to a related motivation for becoming a Chair: the opportunity to expand one’s sphere of influence. Workman (1998) noted that a teacher-turned-administrator shifts focus from one classroom to dozens, from one group of students to hundreds. A teacher’s actions influence one group of students, but a Chair’s actions influence a group of teachers who, in turn, influence their groups of students.
A further benefit of working as a Chair is the professional challenge it offers. Because a Chair works with other administrators and with committees across campus and beyond, their involvement in school life outside the silos of their own faculty naturally expands. The Chair experience offers the opportunity to see things from an administrator’s point of view, to “see the big picture” as one first-year principal in a US study of schoolteachers who became principals noted in describing her transition to administration. She said that when she was a teacher, she thought she knew how schools operated because she had had extensive involvement in various team-leading responsibilities outside the classroom, but upon becoming a principal, she soon realized that she really did not “have a clue” (Loder & Spillane, 2005, p. 269).

The chance to make a difference in their department in a new and challenging way, the potential for exponential influence, and the opportunity for professional growth are clearly some of the most inviting and rewarding aspects of taking on the role of Chair.

**Differences and Difficulties**

Although the Chair position offers exciting incentives to teachers looking to challenge themselves, there are also distinct differences between administrative work and teaching, along with inherent difficulties associated with the differences that require adjusting to.

One of the most notable differences is the daily interaction with others in the workplace. For example, an instructor in the ELC typically spends most of their time with their one cohort of students and with a few other colleagues throughout the semester, whereas the ELC Chair, interacts frequently with the approximately 30 to 40 ELC instructors along with a student population that typically fluctuates between approximately 250 to 400 students from 20 to 30 different countries, spread out in a program consisting of six levels of language proficiency, over three semesters a year, with six different intakes. In addition, unlike instructors, the ELC Chair
also engages on a daily basis with many of the other members of the Faculty of International Education, that is, the Dean, the ELC Director and Associate Dean, the managers and staff in Student Services including the areas of admissions, advising, counselling, contract programs, finance, homestay, marketing, and study abroad programs who support not only the ESL students, but also the approximately 2,000 international academic students at VIU. Problem solving, sharing information, and networking with these other approximately 60 other employees is a very different experience from working primarily with students and other instructors every day as instructors do. As Matos (2015) noted, although both instructors and administrators spend long hours in their different jobs, they spend their time differently.

As interesting as it is to interact with a whole new set of colleagues, it takes time and energy to do so, and the effort required is compounded by the ongoing busyness inherent in the work. Indeed, Jacobe (2013) noted that administrators operate in a hectic environment, with endless to-do lists. Whereas an instructor’s time and energy can be filled with processes of exploring, explaining, and encouraging, the Chair’s days are defined by details, deadlines, and drama! After my first few weeks in this position, I dubbed the ELC as the “ER of ESL.” I had thought I was a relatively organized person, but I quickly realized I needed to learn the art of prioritizing in an environment where everything is a priority. Don Chu, Dean of the College of Education, Health, and Human Services at California State University (2012) confirmed this state of affairs in the preface to his book, *The Department Chair Primer: What Chairs Need to Know and Do to Make a Difference*, where he stated that his book was for “academic leaders who are almost certainly too busy to read it—new department chairs” (p. vii).

Foster (2018) noted that this unrelenting busyness is compounded by the need for a Chair to maintain an open-door policy:
In my early months of being a chair, I noticed that my office was a magnet for casual conversations, chronic concerns, pressing issues, and dire emergencies. The range was overwhelming, and I never knew what would present itself. The incomplete tasks would pile up on my desk and the unanswered email and voicemail messages would remain and multiply until the end of the day, when I could finally respond. It seemed at first that the job of an administrator actually started at 5:00 pm when I could finally respond to the paperwork . . . (p. 1).

In addition to the difference in how one spends each day interacting with new people and managing to work amidst a steady stream of interruptions and diversions is another key difference between teaching and administrating: the nature of the work itself. One quantitative study of secondary principals in the state of Iowa found that these administrators spent so much time on routine school management that they had little time left over for curriculum and teaching matters (Sodoma & Else, 2009). While part-time Chairs continue to teach, it is often a strain to manage teaching duties along with the tedious, but often time-sensitive aspects of administrative work. This work is vastly different from what full-time teachers do. Lesson planning and teaching are often very creative and energizing activities. Marking, not so much, but at least it is finite. As Foster (2018) described, for the Chair, “the multiple committee meetings and the subcommittee meetings beckon from all hours of the day and email messages are relentless and incessant. The appointments with students never abate and there are always PD (professional development) days or other events to organize” (p. 2). This somewhat dismaying characterization of administrative work is reflected in a study of 38 faculty members who were now teaching, but had previously worked as student affairs practitioners and had been members of the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators (NASPA). The survey
respondents reported having experienced more control over their “quality of life” when they became faculty members than when they had worked as administrators (McCluskey, Cawthon, & Cawthon, 2004).

Indeed, the different daily interactions, the pace, and the type of work inherent in administration constitute a very different experience from teaching. Adjusting to these differences requires a shift in one’s focus of attention. Gmelch and Miskin (2011) described the transition as moving from autonomy to accountability. Autonomy implies a sense of freedom, while, accountability, suggests responsibility, or having to explain or justify one’s actions. While a teacher obviously must be responsible and is indeed accountable to various stakeholders, and an administrator can also operate with a certain amount of freedom, the ratio of autonomy vs. accountability is different for the different roles.

Accepting this shift in focus is a challenge in itself, but what may be an even greater challenge is that the adjustment can lead to a questioning of one’s professional self-identity. In Loder and Spillane’s (2005) study of new principals, the participants experienced an actual sense of role conflict when moving from the private and intimate domain of the classroom where they focused on instruction and students, to the public domain of the school and community where they had to shift their focus to managerial and political responsibilities.

Loder and Spillane (2005) also noted that working closely with students and getting to know them personally is one of the most rewarding aspects of teaching, but for the administrator, this close involvement with students is often limited to dealing with disciplinary matters. This is certainly the case for the ELC Chair. Teachers are used to caring for students primarily as advocates, and as they manage discipline within their classrooms, they can often prevent incidents from escalating, but the Chair deals with disciplinary matters after the fact, when they
themselves were not originally involved in the incident. Stripped of their own familiar strategies of prevention or response, they must now untangle messes and fix problems created by others. Workman’s (1998) study on teachers transitioning to assistant principalship confirmed that this adjustment to dealing with discipline adds to the stress of the transition from teacher to administrator. Furthermore, Loder and Spillane (2005) found that being more directly responsible for student discipline marked a dramatic shift in relationships with students and with other teachers.

A Chair is a liaison between teachers and the Director or Associate Dean or Dean, between teachers and other teachers, and between students and teachers. It is a mediator role, not unlike the role of a vice-principal in a school, which Rintoul and Goulais (2010) aptly characterize as a “middle role, veiled in ambiguity” (p. 746). The trap for Chairs is that while they are still instructors and are technically not administrators or supervisors of instructors, because they are doing administrative work, they are often perceived to be administrators. This ambiguity of authority and perceived shift in status can be especially hard for Chairs who have built up collegial relationships and true friendships with other teachers in the past. New principals in Loder and Spillane’s study (2005) felt that teachers viewed them as having “stepped over that line” or having crossed over to “the other side” and the principals considered this as one of the most difficult adjustments they had to accept (p. 271). Indeed, Workman’s (1998) study confirmed that this role conflict adds to the stress of the transition from teacher to administrator. This is the case not only in academia, but in the business world as well. W. Steven Brown, Founder and Chairman of the Fortune Group International warned that managers have to make a choice, “You must be the buddy or the manager” and noted that in his experience, managers who struggled the most with the conflict of being friends with their subordinates were those who had
come up “through the ranks” (1985, p. 121). Chairs will have been teachers in their departments first and are likely to face this dilemma when acting as managerial liaisons since the position of responsibility they now hold is complicated by a vague, not-quite-legitimate-and-yet-perceived degree of perceived authority among their peers.

Lessons Learned

Given the inherent differences and challenges experienced in adjusting to an administrative role, some might ask, is it worth it? In my research, I did not come across expressions of regret, but certainly many expressions of self-reflection. First, there was a consensus as to the steep learning curve new administrators had experienced (Jacobe, 2013; Loder & Spillane, 2005; Matos, 2015; Workman, 1998). This is particularly true for Chairs. Gmelch and Miskin (2011) stated, “It is well known that few chairs receive training to prepare and maintain leadership skills” (p. 155). Some have to learn on their own, while others benefit from some form of mentorship from the incumbent Chair, their Dean, or other faculty members. On this point, Chu (2012) stressed the importance for Chairs to “reach out” for help when adjusting to the role:

New chairs typically feel overwhelmed with new responsibilities and tasks. There is a real tendency to hunker down for the duration and feel that you have to get it all sorted out and done on your own. In fact, the solution—is in sharing the load. Reach out to others and find out how you can help each other (p. 90).

In a study of educational administrators who mentored interns in their fields, Clayton and Thessin (2017) revealed the need for “clarification about the role of the mentor and the need for clear expectations for the intern” and called for “collaborative and creative approaches” to ensure that aspiring administrators acquire the leadership experience they need to further their own learning and growth” (p. 306).
While navigating complexities of the challenges, Clayton and Thessin (2017) also stressed the value of good communication skills. Foster (2018) further emphasized the importance of taking the time to simply listen to teachers and students. She also found that attending to “little things” and “seemingly understated acts of support” resulted in a great deal of appreciation. She noted, “My time as an ESL chair taught me that you cannot support teaching and learning without first supporting the teachers and learners” (p. 2) and stressed how the experience helped her become more empathetic toward teachers, learners, and administrators.

The growth in learning however, over time, also results in greater confidence and a sense of accomplishment. Chu (2012) related one case study of a Mathematics Department which involved the experience of a professor who decided to take on the role of Chair after hearing so many of his fellow faculty members “complain about the lack of support and respect for mathematics” (p. 4) As a result of his approach, he was able to make significant improvements. Chu quoted the professor-turned-chair as having stated,

My colleagues throughout our college have noticed the changes. Other department chairs have asked me how we did this—how we changed both the effectiveness of our teaching and our productivity as scholars, but also how we have revitalized the spirit of the department. We wanted to do things better, and that’s what we have achieved. We are all very proud (p. 7).

There is no doubt that Chairs not only learn a great deal from the experience personally and professionally, but that they are also able to make significant contributions to their departments.
Conclusion

When examined through the themes of motivation and rewards, differences and difficulties, and lessons learned, the research on the subject of transitioning from teaching to administrating revealed several similarities among those who have experienced the phenomenon. For many of the educators, the reason for making the leap was to take advantage of a new opportunity and broaden their professional experience. They found this interesting and intellectually satisfying, but at the same time, challenging due to the many differences and difficulties they had not fully anticipated. Despite the challenges, it was generally viewed as a worthwhile experience.
Chapter Three: Methodology

Research Design

In pursuing a phenomenological methodology for this study, I determined that interviews would be the most reliable and valid means of exploring the experience I wanted to examine. Conducting a focus group was another option, but as Stokes and Bergin (2006) found, although groups may be less time-consuming and may offer a greater breadth of data, they can foster a consensus view, whereas individual interviews provide more depth, detail, and subtleties in attitudes. This was what I wanted to uncover in my research; therefore, I opted for interviews.

I interviewed six former or current Chairs at Vancouver Island University. Three of the six interviewees were former Chairs of the ELC and the other three were current Chairs in other Faculties. Prior to the interviews, the participants were given an explanation of the study and the expectations of their role in it, a letter of consent to sign, and a copy of the questions I planned to ask. Each interview lasted approximately one hour.

The overarching research question was, “What are the experiences of university Faculty members adjusting to the role of Department Chair?” The interviewees were asked a series of questions designed to elicit responses based on three main themes which had emerged as reoccurring issues in my review of the literature on the subject prior to interviewing: 1) motivation and rewards for a teacher taking on the role of Chair, 2) the main differences between teaching and administrating and the difficulties encountered, and 3) lessons learned and advice for others contemplating taking on the role.

Sample

Among the six interviewees, the three former Chairs of the ELC who were interviewed had all held various teaching positions for many years prior to their administrative experience as
Chair and had all returned to teaching in the ELC after having been the Chair full-time for a number of years. Further, upon leaving the Chair position, all three had also worked temporarily in other administrative positions in the ELC. Although they had all worked in the same department, they had each worked in different “eras” of this department—a department which had undergone significant change throughout the years they had worked as the Chair—and this contributed to each one having somewhat different experiences. The other three interviewees are currently serving as Chairs in different departments at VIU. They had all been teachers prior to becoming Chair and are all continuing to teach part-time along with working as Chair part-time. Although I only knew them professionally, I knew them well enough to feel comfortable asking them to take the time and effort to participate in this research. I was also aware that they had been Chairs for at least one year, thus giving them enough experience to be able to speak as authentic and credible sources.

The participants were selected from different Faculties and from both the British Columbia General Employee’s Union (BCGEU) and the Vancouver Island University Faculty Association (VIUFA) in order to represent the diversity of experience across campus.

Instrument Used

The interviewees were asked ten basic questions, along with probing questions when deemed appropriate. The questions were open-ended so as to elicit as honest and meaningful responses as possible.

The first question, and its related follow-up questions, focused on the participants’ teaching background: “Tell me about your experience of being a teacher prior to becoming the Chair of your Department. For example, what is your area of expertise? What subject(s) did you teach? How long were you a teacher? Why did you become a teacher in the first place? What did
you enjoy or not enjoy about teaching?” The purpose of these questions was to contextualize the responses to the rest of the questions relating to their Chair experience versus their teaching experience.

Questions 2 to 9 were designed to elicit reflections on the experience itself as they related to the themes of the study. Question 2 was based on one aspect of the first theme, motivation: “Next, let’s talk about your Chair experience. What motivated you to become the Chair of your Department?” while Question 3 was linked to the other aspect of the first theme, rewards, as well as to the second theme, differences and difficulties, in that it asked them to rate their Chair experience: “On a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 being the most negative, and 5 being the most positive, overall, how positive was, or has been, your experience as Chair? Please elaborate.” This question was included in order to have a simple scale with which to compare the experiences of the six participants. I thought it would be interesting to include this type of quantitative data alongside the qualitative data elicited from the responses to Questions 4, 5, and 6 which probed for in-depth analysis of the themes of motivation, rewards, differences, and difficulties. Question 4 asked, “What do you consider to be the main differences between teaching and administrating and what do you like or dislike about administrating?” Questions 5 and 6 queried the negative and positive aspects of the experience respectively: “What was, or has been, the most difficult aspect(s) of going through the adjustment period of being a Chair?” and “What was, or has been, the most rewarding aspect(s) of being a Chair?”

Questions 7, 8, 9, and 10 were designed to explore the reflective nature of the third theme by probing the effects of the experience on the individual. The questions were, “How has the experience affected your personal and/or professional self-identity?”; “What did you learn the most from the experience? Is there anything you wished you had done differently?”; and “For
former Chairs, now teaching, how did the Chair experience inform your teaching? (Or, for current Chairs also currently teaching, how does being Chair inform your teaching?)” The interview concluded with Question 10, asking for the participants to share any lessons learned with potential new Chairs: “What advice (suggestions, warnings, or recommendations) do you have for other teachers contemplating taking on the role of Chair?”

I found that these ten questions worked well within the planned time frame. I felt that we were able to touch on each theme, some more in depth than others, and in general without rushing or digressing too far from the topics.

Procedures Followed

I began the investigative process by having identified eight different colleagues to interview. I approached them in person to inquire as to whether they would be willing and/or available to participate. I am currently working with the three former Chairs of the ELC, and to find the current Chairs, I reviewed the VIU Employee Directory to determine who might be suitable. I selected five from that list, but eventually two politely declined to participate due to time restrictions. With the final six interviewees, I explained the purpose of the study and what their participation would involve. Upon receiving their verbal agreement, I then emailed them with a formal request outlining in more detail what the expectations were. I attached a letter of consent and a copy of the questions to the email. I included the questions in case they felt more comfortable having some time to reflect on their experiences and to potentially provide thoughtful examples or stories to illustrate their reflections.

The email stated the title of the thesis and that by investigating the experiences of instructors who became Chairs of their departments, my hope was that this research would provide a better understanding of the experience of adjusting to this unique leadership role. I told them that
I expected the interview to take 45-60 minutes and that I wanted to record the conversation for the purpose of accuracy and so that I could be free to listen more intently without taking notes. I explained that I would transcribe the conversation, but that after a certain period of time, I would destroy the recordings and the transcripts. The letter of consent explained that the records of their participation would be confidential and that only my supervisor and I would have access to the information in which they were identified. It included a disclaimer that although the information collected during the interview was unlikely to be controversial, as I would be working with a relatively small sample, the interviewees should be aware there could be a potential risk that their answers could indirectly identify them. Additionally, I offered to provide them with a copy of the data analysis for their review should they wish to correct, modify, or withdraw any comments.

After appointments were made to meet, I booked mutually convenient meeting rooms on the VIU campus in which to hold the interviews. The intent of the room selection was to create a neutral atmosphere, to minimize the distractions of the participants’ current working environment, and reduce the potential for interruptions.

I began the interviews by thanking the participants for taking part in the research and asking them if they had had a chance to review the questions. Some interviewees had, and had even made notes, while others had only read them briefly. Once they said they felt ready to talk, I started the digital recorder and explained the procedure: that we would engage in a conversation based on the questions, but that the interviewees were free to digress or add to points they felt had not been covered by the questions.

Finally, I transcribed each interview verbatim and then began the process of coding the responses based on the three themes of the study. After compiling the comments under the themes, I contacted each interviewee once more to offer them the opportunity to review the
transcripts and/or my analysis of their comments (i.e., Chapter 4) in order to confirm that they were satisfied with the accuracy of the comments used and that their anonymity had not been violated. All participants preferred to review the chapter as written and all approved the results of the interviews.

**Reliability and Validity**

Guba (1981) established that the necessary elements of reliability and validity as found in qualitative studies can be expressed as trustworthiness; that is, the extent to which the quality of a study is ensured through the data, interpretation, and methods used (Pilot & Beck, 2014 as cited in Connelly, 2016). Further, Guba (1981, p. 80) determined that the criteria for ensuring trustworthiness are credibility (truth value), transferability (applicability), dependability (consistency), and confirmability (neutrality).

Trustworthiness was ensured throughout this study in several ways. First, the study is credible because the methods used followed standard procedures for interviewing, the interviewees were representative of a group who were capable of answering the research question through their lived experience, and the questions were not only open-ended, but also designed to avoid bias on my part as they were derived from the themes identified in the literature rather than just from my own experience. The element of transferability was clear in that the experiences described by the interviewees were authentic—true for them—and detailed regarding the context in which they had experienced the phenomena. Dependability was confirmed by measures such as consistently asking the same questions to each interviewee and conducting the interviews under the same conditions, time restraints, and even location. By using the same meeting room for most of the interviews, I did not need to adapt to a different environment each time, and could concentrate more fully on the questions, the responses, and
any technical logistics with the recording. Finally, trustworthiness was established through confirmability, that is, the neutrality by which I collected and recorded the data, and by taking the step of member checking in asking the participants themselves to review the findings and analysis.

**Analysis Techniques**

I had identified three main themes from the literature as being central to a better understanding of the experience and as therefore contributing to knowledge in this field of study. After transcribing the interviews, which took an average of about five hours each, and having saved them into six separate files, I coded the content. This was a four-step process. First, I created separate files for the questions (combining the first two questions because of how closely they were related): Q1 & 2 Background and Motivation, Q3 Ratings, Q4 Differences, Q5 Difficulties, Q6 Rewards, Q7 Identity, Q8 Lessons Learned, Q9 Informed Teaching, and Q10 Advice. Next, from each interviewee’s file, I extracted statements that addressed each of the questions and copied and pasted them into the question files. Thirdly, I reviewed each question file and consolidated the issues under the three main themes as stated above. Once all of the comments were categorized under the three themes, I examined various aspects of each theme by grouping the comments into *subtopics* within each theme. In this way, I was able to analyze the themes in depth and eventually draw conclusions based on the evidence.
Chapter 4: Findings

Introduction

The previous chapter discussed the methodology and procedures used to examine the experience of instructors who had transitioned to the role of Chair of their department. This chapter describes the findings from the data collected from the participants in the study. None of the participants seemed to be overly concerned about concealing their identities, but I did strive to preserve their anonymity in order to elicit the most honest feedback as possible. Therefore, in keeping with that commitment, I have used the non-gendered pronouns “they” or “them” for both singular and plural references throughout the analysis, and even though half of the participants were former Chairs and the other half are currently working as Chairs, I have referred to all the participants simply as “a Chair” or “the Chairs.” Some worked (or are working) as full-time Chairs and others as part-time while continuing to teach, but notice was given in the analysis if that distinction was a relevant factor.

I explored the Chairs’ experiences and mine through the lens of three themes, which had emerged from a review of the literature on the subject: 1) motivation and rewards, 2) differences and difficulties, and 3) lessons learned. I have relied heavily on direct quotes as I wanted to allow their voices to be heard as clearly and colourfully as possible.

Motivation and Rewards

I combined the topics of “motivation” and “rewards” into one theme because I found that the interviewees’ reasons for aspiring to the role of Chair turned out to be closely aligned to what they identified as being the rewards they eventually reaped. There was also consensus among them as to what these motivating factors and rewards were and these can be sorted into three
main subtopics: the challenge of it and trying something new, the chance for professional growth by broadening their perspective, and the opportunity to expand their ability to help people.

As for the challenge of it, all the Chairs noted that a key factor attracting them to this role was the opportunity to *push* themselves. As one put it,

I saw it as an opportunity to advance my own skills, in a way, an advancement that would help me to refine my own communication skills both oral and written. I thought the challenge of it, and also an opportunity to do something a little bit different, and to see the goings on from a different perspective . . . would be interesting. A nice change.

Another Chair described the experience as “intellectually challenging” because “you keep finding new things and trying new things, and you get to watch people be successful. That’s the best part. You feel successful when they are.” Several Chairs saw this as chance to work outside the comfort zone of their classrooms. “It challenges you to learn more; you get to work with different people.” Another elaborated on this opportunity by saying, “The interaction with a different group of people and at a higher level made me really want to run to catch up . . . You’re just working at a different level with a different group of people.” This Chair called the learning experience “a real explosion” and gave an example of having chaired a departmental meeting where they felt they had not managed it well: “I didn’t know what I was doing. I was absolutely fumbling.” Yet, rather than being discouraged, they accepted it as a learning moment. They continued by saying,

You know how you feel when you feel you’ve been caught out? You’re embarrassed and you don’t want to be caught like that again? So you’ll do anything so that it doesn’t happen again. I really had to do a lot more and understand a lot more about how to run these kinds of meetings. I had no idea. It made me feel that I had to do better.
Related to the motivation of trying something new was seeing this as an opportunity for growth by broadening their perspective. As one Chair said, “It’s definitely a sacrifice, but it’s a great learning experience.” Another said it was a fulfilling experience because, “I just really like knowing what’s going on. I’m on a bunch of committees. I enjoy knowing and understanding how things work and knowing what’s going on.” More than one Chair commented on how being on so many different committees outside their department contributed to a broader understanding of the greater context of their own work environment. One said that being on these committees “allows you to grow.” This Chair elaborated on the growth experience describing it this way:

It is work, but there are some really rewarding things out of that work. I think you grow in ways you don’t even know you’re growing and learning through osmosis just by doing it and one day you suddenly go, well, how did I come up with the skills to do that? And you did it through meeting all of these people, and being on committees with them, and working with them, working with students, and you just become better at things.

Several Chairs commented on how the experience gave them a different perspective from that of a teacher, and as one called it, a chance to “see both sides.” This Chair explained:

You get to see beyond the classroom, why administration might make certain decisions. You may not like them, or as a Chair, you may not like some of the decisions the instructors want, but you understand it, and I think that it helps to broaden your perspective . . . When I went back to being a classroom teacher, I didn’t really have many problems with administration because I could understand why they might do it, but it’s hard to communicate that to teachers who haven’t been in that spot. They think as a teacher.
This Chair continued by saying that you get to “understand more how the university works” and exemplified that with an experience of having dealt with the administrative concern of classroom allocation:

So the university allocates classrooms and you’re expected to use them because the university records that as data, and then, if the university wants to propose to the Ministry of Advanced Education the building of a new building, they have to show that they’re working beyond capacity. You would never know that as a teacher.

Finally, a common trait among these Chairs was that what they liked about teaching was “helping people” and that they viewed chairing as a natural extension of that. As one said, one of the things they liked best about having been a Chair was “when I was able to help people, I was able to help them in a real way. When you’re Chair and you make a decision and you help someone, it can make a profound impact on them.” Another put it this way, “I like to help. It’s the teacher in me. I like to give direction. And, as a Chair, I am able to do that on a bigger scale.”

One Chair said they liked “making change happen” and another described themselves as “a person who gets things done, moves things forward.” Another commented that they saw it as an opportunity to “upgrade things . . . to leave something better than when you started, change things,” and noted that the best part of the position was supporting the faculty, students, and staff “to ensure that the department is running very well, and everybody is happy, comfortable, students are having a great experience. And when you see that unfold, and you know that you had a part, a hand in that, that is probably the most rewarding.” Another said, “We did a lot” and what this Chair liked about that was “the feeling of accomplishment, of having contributed. Could not have done that just being a teacher.”
It was not lost on the interviewees that the reward of being able to contribute to the operation of their department in a unique way comes in tandem with a heightened sense of responsibility. As one participant said, “as Chair, you feel a responsibility to everybody.” Another spoke of embracing this responsibility because of the satisfaction it brought to have contributed to the “successful running of the programs.” This Chair found it particularly rewarding to be able to provide leadership in the promotion of research. They elaborated,

Sending out emails about deadlines, facilitating more research, getting students applying for scholarships, nominating faculty for awards . . . I think being Chair helped me feel the impetus to speak up and reach out to everybody [to encourage research opportunities] and I wouldn’t have done that as a faculty member.

Another satisfying aspect of shouldering responsibility that was mentioned by more than one Chair was when they were able to provide a safe, confidential place for instructors, students, staff, and even administrators to “vent and let it go” as one put it. One said they liked being able to provide a “neutral place for them to air any issues that they had and try to help them find solutions. Some just wanted an ear . . . so that they felt supported.”

As seen in this section, the interviewees found that their desires to attempt a challenge, to promote their professional growth, and to extend their ability to make a difference as educators were rewarded through their Chair experiences and were considered benefits despite the added responsibilities that came with the position. Some responsibilities Chairs have may be similar to those instructors carry, but there are also distinct differences. These will be explored in the next section.
Differences and Difficulties

“Nobody taught me anything. Nobody! New position. Didn’t know how to use SRS [Student Record System]. I had no idea I could access all the students’ records. I just chaired my first hiring committee! How does admissions work?!?” stated one Chair when talking about the early adjustment period. Each Chair’s experience was unique in that some had come into a newly created position, others had come into an established position, but with their predecessor absent at the time of transition, and still others had been able to transition with the help of their predecessor; however, all shared very similar reactions to what they had experienced, especially during the transition period. This section will examine the theme of “differences and difficulties”—again, as with the first theme, I discovered a dual nature within one theme as the topic of differences between teaching and administrating seemed to be closely related to the topic of the difficulties experienced.

First and foremost, all Chairs pointed out the steep learning curve they had encountered. One commented, “It’s pretty complex at first and pretty overwhelming and daunting,” and another noted that one of the biggest challenges was “just learning where all the information is located” and described the work as having to “clean up a bunch of stuff and develop processes . . . as the person paying attention to things.”

All Chairs noted that it takes a great deal of time to adjust. One said that because there had not been a Chair before them, for the “first six months to a year . . . I didn’t know what the heck I was doing.” Another said, “I firmly believe you’re not even getting going unless you’ve done it for two years.” Another acknowledged that HR offers Chair’s training, but pointed out that in spite of having done the training, they still had not grasped the breadth of the challenge:
For me to learn what the heck I was supposed to be doing was really, really hard! I felt like it took me almost a year to really figure things out. I just didn't have a clue. And there are just so many little pieces you don’t think about. There are all these little responsibilities that you just don’t know about until you know that they are there.

Furthermore, an added stressor that contributes to the learning curve was, as one put it, “juggling so many balls at once” and “you have to prioritize.” This Chair elaborated:

It’s almost like I come to work on Monday morning and I go, OK, who’s getting my attention this week? And I have the dean’s office, my students, or the faculty, and I pick one out, and I go, this week I’m working on keeping the dean’s office happy, and then the next week, pick a name out. Well this week the students get me. It’s tough to balance all that.

In addition to the juggling, the notion that you “never know what to expect” emerged as a common sentiment among the Chairs. One talked about having to be “nimble” and “calm.”

Another described adjusting to this dynamic in this way:

So when someone comes into your office, you really don’t know what they’re going to say. When they come in, they can say aaaanything. So at first you’re like . . . agh! At first I always felt pressure to find a solution and I realized that often when people come into your office, they just want you to listen . . . I was nervous at first. I learned to just relax and listen, and I probably found myself asking more of those reflective questions—so you’re saying this, and you feel this . . .

Never knowing what to expect also speaks to the ongoing, seemingly endless nature of the work. Several noted that they had accrued an exorbitant amount of vacation time because they found it was difficult to take time off. One describe it this way:
When you’re teaching you are stupidly busy. You’re marking and you’re planning and meeting. The hours I work compared to the hours I’m paid are severely disproportionate. But then in the break times, I’m OFF. I might do some planning, or I might do some reading, but it really is my choice, so when I’m on vacation, I actively take break. I’ve discovered now that I’m in administration, those break times aren’t break. I keep working . . . My evenings are more my time now, but I’m losing my weekends and vacations. I feel like I didn’t have that chunk, that dedicated break . . . really only Christmas from December 22nd to January 2nd, when school is closed, that’s valuable, because that time, I check my email only for personal reasons, and there’s nothing I can do, so that little window of time is lovely. I wish there was more of it!

In addition to finding it difficult to take vacation time, a couple of Chairs lamented not having time for their own individual professional pursuits, one commenting for example that, “I don’t get any research done,” and another saying, “I really enjoy being able to present at conferences and publish, and when I found I was in that role, I didn’t have enough time. When I went home, I was really taxed. I was tired.”

Finally, a notable adjustment was a shift in the focus of attention from primarily students to so many others: colleagues, staff, and students. As one said, “Your focus is on students when you’re teaching. When you’re doing the Chair, you’re thinking of the university, department, staff, and what everybody needs.” One former Chair, who is now teaching, estimated that their attention is now 100% on students, albeit in collaboration with teaching partners, whereas as Chair it was “50/50 between teachers and students.” This shift in focus of attention can in some ways also be seen as a shift in allegiance as well. This Chair noted, “I was representing the teachers. And now, the students. To me, they’re my priority” and elaborated:
When you are administrating, the decisions you make affect teachers. Because, at the end of the day, for the most part, I felt as Chair, I had to have the teacher’s back. There were even some cases where I disagreed with the teacher, but I still felt as Chair, I wanted to have the teacher’s back, as long as it wasn’t something terribly egregious.

This change in focus is inherent in the change in roles. One Chair described this shift as “learning your role” and pointed out how this takes time for both the Chair and the faculty to adjust to this. They explained:

You’re there to support students, faculty, staff of that area. You’re not there to boss them around; you’re there to make that experience a better experience. It takes a while to learn how to do that and how you fit into that role. You have to gather the respect of the other staff members, they have to know that you’re there to help them. You have to gather their trust, so I think that’s an adjustment, too, that they can trust that they can come to you to have a conversation or ask you for help, so that’s a bit of adjustment, and people don’t do that in a matter of a day or two. It takes six months to a year especially in a large department. You don’t gain that trust overnight, I think it takes a while. So people on your staff just get used to you, like you, and think you have value.

Other Chairs also alluded to the importance of gaining the trust of the faculty. One called it “the art and science of leading peers” and another talked about having spent time “thinking of how to delegate tasks so other people can take ownership. Guiding the faculty somehow to have a vision in your department. Focusing on planting seeds. Making people have ideas. Letting people come up with ideas and own them.” Another further explained it this way:

With teaching you can be much more ‘this is my decision and we’re going with it.’ And with administrating, you can’t. It’s kinda like, OK, I want you to come along with me.
You have to find a way to get people to agree with you. Because if you do say ‘I don’t care what you think, you’re doing this,’ then they’ll fight you, and sabotage. So, you can’t do that. You have to bring them along. And if you don’t get them enthusiastic and interested in doing stuff, you’ll lose them. It’s more necessary in admin than it is in the classroom because [with students] I can just turn around and say ‘OK, I’ve given you lots of time to come along and so now I’m saying this is what you do,’ but you can’t do that with an equal. There is a power differential in the classroom. But in admin, you’re equals. As Faculty Chair, you’re still the same. You can’t give commands.

Another Chair described this ambiguity of authority as being in a state of “neither nor.” They elaborated:

It puts you in an awkward spot where you’re not administration, but you’re really not faculty. Technically you’re faculty, but you’re not because you are involved in duties which set you apart from faculty, so you’re in a very, very sensitive, delicate spot. And that makes it very different from the Director who is clearly your employer—clearly—but as a Chair you are wearing two hats and it can get blurred and it can get a little awkward.

In fact, some Chairs felt this awkward position had made them the victim of the perception that they had, as one put it, “gone over to the dark side.” One former Chair said,

I think instructors don’t see me in the same way that they may have seen me before, now that I have served as Chair . . . she still has one foot in admin . . . I don’t think it’s a positive thing.

The difficulties experienced had taken more of an emotional toll on some Chairs than on others; however, none of them alluded to the difficulties as being necessarily harder than those they had experienced as teachers, just different, and there seemed to be a general consensus that
the difficulties lay partially in simply getting used to the differences. As one said, “It grows on you. Or, maybe you grow into it. Either way, you’re never the same afterwards. But, I think that’s a good thing. Who wants to stay in a rut?”

**Lessons Learned**

While not minimizing the difficulties they had faced, all of the Chairs commented on what a valuable learning experience being Chair was and how it had changed them both professionally and personally. The most common changes mentioned were an improvement in leadership skills, greater empathy toward others, and increased confidence.

A valuable learning experience as seen by the Chairs was having developed better leadership skills. One Chair said,

What I’ve learned the most is my ability to lead a group of people. People will do anything for you if they think you support them, trust them, protect them. These are leadership abilities and qualities I can transfer anywhere, even with my relationship with my kids and my wife. Learning how to communicate, negotiate, listen.

Another Chair described having learned the importance of facilitating communication in terms of having developed better organizational skills such as booking meetings in advance, giving out agendas, minutes, and giving people time to give feedback.

Another aspect of developing leadership skills is the ability to be more reflective. One Chair said, “I really have been able to identify my own strengths and weaknesses, better than I think I ever was before” and described themselves as being “a little more open to ideas instead of jumping to conclusions . . . instead now I’ll say, ‘I hadn’t considered that before, let me think about that.’ I think I have become a better listener.” Another said, “All those skills that you’re learning, communication, mentoring, just being more patient, learning how to do all these things
that you do, I think does change you, your identity.” Changing and questioning one’s identity is not easy as one Chair, who strongly identifies as an academic, commented, “the research part of my identity really suffers.” They referred to working as Chair as a “sacrifice” explaining,

You have to give things up to do the admin piece. You’re always making tough choices between this thing that might contribute to your research identity and this thing that’s attached to your Chair identity and your leadership. For me, when it involves someone else, which all the Chair work does, that gets done. And then my personal research, which is really just me, me and my data. I’ll analyze that data and write that paper when I have time, but that’s really for me, but that doesn’t get done because that’s for me, but for everything that’s for other people . . . well, I could do a better job with my teaching if I wasn’t Chair. It makes me wonder what I like best. Do I want a hard-core research job? Or, do I want a hard-core leadership type job? Or do I want to scale all this back and teach?

One Chair reflected on having learned to be “more measured about letting my emotions show” and talked extensively about the decision-making processes this entailed:

There were times when I felt attacked; I took it personally, when really it had nothing to do with me, it had everything to do with the situation. Sometimes I felt like I’d start losing my confidence and I’d think, “Do I have their support? Do I have their trust? Or, are they on side with me?” You know, you start feeling a bit insecure. I’m sure there were times when they weren’t all on side with me. So, that was challenging. And so what you have to do is rise above that and realize, OK I’m in this position and I have to maintain a certain emotional level of security here and I have to sort of try to somehow put my insecure feelings aside and focus on the task at hand. It’s hard to do, but I had to do it.
You just make a decision, you just go with it, and you try to go back to what you know to be true, if it’s the Collective Agreement or whatever it is that’s driving your decision that may be unpopular, go back to why you made it, go back to the principles that you should be looking at when you make that decision. I know there were a couple of times that faculty was upset with me, but we had a set of criteria to make those decisions, and I had to keep going back to the reason I made those decisions.

Another lesson the Chairs said they had learned was to become more empathetic toward others. Several commented that they become better listeners. As one said, “I learned to listen more, and really listen. To try and understand where the other person is coming from.” Another also described themselves as “probably a little bit like this before, but after having been Chair, I was really emphatic about if you have a problem, come and see me. We can work it out together,” and a former Chair now teaching said, “I’m more patient because I know that, sure my students don’t read, but I learned that teachers don’t read either! I accept people’s foibles more. I’m more accepting.” One attributed their ability to being more sympathetic with administration after having been a Chair to having “a better understanding of how things work” and having learned “the proper channels to fix problems rather than just complaining.” Another said, “I’m far more aware of our programs. I know more about what our students are going through. I’m in charge of the big picture and know more about what teachers are teaching and the scope of the student experience.” One former Chair described having acquired a heightened awareness of the classroom experience from the students’ point of view and thus having developed a desire to provide better “customer service.” They said, “When I went back in as a teacher, I saw them not only as students, but as clients.”
In addition to becoming more empathetic, several Chairs expressed that they had also learned to be more confident. As one Chair said, “I’m much more willing to speak up. I learned a heck of a lot. It would have been a lot easier, a lot less time, a lot less to worry about, but it was good for me.” Another former Chair described themselves as “a reluctant leader” who is “less reluctant now.” This Chair added, “If I need to step up, I’ll just do it. I feel that it gave me a lot of personal strength.” Another said that when things happen, start to get out of control, and feel like what they are doing is “frantic paddling,” that because of the Chair experience, “I know I can handle it now” and added,

I feel much more capable, much stronger, more organized. I know I have the ability to do things I didn’t know I had the ability to do. To deal with problems and to talk to people and to plan timetables. I am getting better at saying no when needed, better at time management.”

This Chair gave an example of how this newfound confidence had spilled over into their personal life in a rather unexpected way. They explained, “We’ve always rented houses and just put an offer on one to buy. I know this sounds crazy, but we didn’t feel grown up enough to do it. Now I feel I can take care of it.”

In addition to commenting on how the Chair experience can improve leadership skills, develop greater empathy toward others, and increase self-confidence, the interviewees also passed on some advice to others contemplating taking on this role. One noted, “You have to have that ability to lead, organize, prioritize,” and another warned that although it is a release position, “you don’t want to do it because you want to get out of the classroom, or because it’s renewal, or relaxation. It’s full on.”
All of the interviewees offered very practical advice as well. Some mentioned how important it is not to hesitate to reach out for help, recommending, for example, spending time with the incumbent if possible or talking with a Chair of a different department. Another added, “Get a mentor. Even in another faculty” while another said, “Your Admin assistant is your best friend, even more so than the Dean in many cases. They know everything. Make sure they feel supported and appreciated.” One Chair noted, “Different Chairs do things differently. Don’t be intimidated if someone seems to have done it better than you.” Another said, for example, they did not give out their home phone number because they did not want to be called late at night and stressed, “Draw some lines in the sand.” Another further advised, “Go home at 4:00, or as close to 4:00 as possible because, if you stay, you can always find something to do. And it will be there tomorrow, but you may not be healthy tomorrow. So, if you don’t take care of yourself, nobody else will and you’ll eventually burn out. And that’s worse for the department than not getting that email out on Tuesday. You have to accept your own limits.” This Chair added, “Enjoy. And when you make a mistake, it’s not the end of the world. People are really good about forgiving you.” Another summed up, “It’s a fabulous learning experience, a chance to grow. And, when you grow, you give back, so it’s a win-win for the faculty and for yourself. I feel that professionally, I was able to grow beyond being a teacher.”

Finally, in the interview question, “On a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 being the most negative, and 5 being the most positive, overall, how positive was, or has been, your experience as Chair?” results showed that all the Chairs rated the experience positively, that is, with an average score of 4.3 out of 5, that is at 86%. An A! This high rating speaks to the depth of the positive aspects of the experience given the frustrations, struggles, and stress they all felt at some point, especially during the transition period.
Chapter 5: Conclusions

Summary

This study examined various experiences of faculty members who had become the Chair of their department at Vancouver Island University (VIU). The purpose of the study was to explore how the experience had impacted them on both a professional and personal level and to provide a reference for other instructors considering applying for the role of Chair in the future.

The research triangulated the literature on the subject, my own experience as Chair of the English Language Centre in the Faculty of International Education for, at this writing, almost four years, and the findings from interviews with six former or current Chairs at VIU. I met with these Chairs individually for about an hour each, and asked a series of 10 questions designed to elicit responses based on three main themes: 1) motivation and rewards for a teacher taking on the role of Chair, 2) the main differences between teaching and administrating and the difficulties encountered, and 3) lessons learned. The last theme included advice they shared to other instructors who may be contemplating taking on the role.

I hypothesized that those who transition from instructing to administrating share common motivating reasons and reap similar rewards; they experience many of the same type of differences and face many of the same difficulties; and they have something to offer in the way of advice to future Chairs. Despite the fact that these Chairs worked in different departments or at different stages of development within the same department, the results of the investigation confirmed these hypotheses. Furthermore, all of the Chairs, including myself, viewed the experience as challenging, but worthwhile.
Discussion of Key Findings

The interviews proved to be incredibly informative and it was clear that the experience of having taken on the role of Chair had made a significant impact on the lives of these individuals. I was impressed with how willingly and frankly the participants spoke about their experiences. I know from my own case, trying to describe the experience to others is like talking about “the agony and the ecstasy.” When things go well, they go very, very well. You revel in your accomplishment and feel proud and satisfied. But, when things go wrong, they can be terribly messy because the issues are often complex and affect so many people. The contributing factors are difficult to anticipate and often out of your hands. You feel inadequate, unprepared, and wonder how you managed to underestimated it all. Despite all that, the overwhelming impression of each of the Chairs in this study was that the experience was a very positive one, and they strongly recommended it to other instructors.

This finding matched my own experience, as it has been one of the best opportunities for personal and professional growth I have ever had. I learned so much about how our department, our faculty, the university, and the union work. I learned so much about other people and about myself. I discovered I have certain organizational, communicative, creative, and people skills that are at times uniquely well honed, and at other times, clearly “emerging.”

When the participants talked about why they had been interested in the Chair position in the first place, and what it was that they liked about it, all of them spoke with enthusiasm about embracing the challenge. They said they were interested in trying something new, and found that indeed, it had pushed them to grow, both professionally and personally, to broaden their perspectives, and had expanded their ability to help people. The people they felt they had helped in particular were teachers, and they also felt they had helped students since they had extended
their sphere of influence exponentially. These findings coincide exactly with my experience as well. The challenges were at times exhausting, but extremely rewarding.

This enthusiastic sense of satisfaction suggests that teachers who become Chairs may tend to be of a certain personality type identified by Joyce and Showers as “gourmet omnivores” (2002, p. 152). They described teachers with this personality type as “mature, high-activity people who have learned to canvass the environment and successfully exploit it . . . they keep aware of the possibilities for growth, and in the workplace, they strive to learn all they can about their craft (p. 151). Based on a 1982 study known as the California Staff Development Study involving 30 case studies and 2,000 surveys which asked about the professional and personal lives of teachers, the researchers found that only 10% of teachers fall into this category. This is not to imply that instructors who aspire to take on administrative roles such as the Chair are any better teachers than those who prefer to continue to work with students in the classroom, but it does perhaps shed some light on the issue of why only a few among the teacher population would be drawn to venture into the quagmire of this type of professional development. As one of the Chairs remarked of the position, “It is not for everybody.”

All the Chairs spoke of the steep learning curve they struggled with when they began their position and several commented on how long it took them to adjust to their situation. Some expressed frustration with their abilities to keep up with the myriad of tasks and the ongoing nature of them. They missed not being able to take much vacation time or to pursue their own academic interests, yet they felt they had improved their leadership skills, learned to be more empathetic toward others, and developed greater self-confidence. My own experience coincided with every one of these sentiments.
Finally, a notable adjustment was a shift in the focus of attention the Chairs felt they had needed to make from primarily focusing on students to colleagues and others. This shift was compounded by a sense of being, as one Chair described it, “in a state of ‘neither nor.’” Neither an instructor, nor an administrator. Technically, the Chair is still an instructor, but is perceived to be an administrator. This state of limbo can also be interpreted as being seen as having made a shift in allegiance, fuelling the perception by instructors that the Chair had, as one put it, “gone over to the dark side.” One Chair remarked on how important it was to maintain the trust of their faculty, and a couple of them spoke of incidences when they felt they had lost the faculty trust and how hard that was on them.

Indeed, in my own experience, one incident in particular where I felt I had lost the trust of the faculty was the all-time low for me. A group of teachers had complained to the Director about a workload issue which had resulted from a program initiative we (the Director and I) had implemented more hastily, we realized later, than instructors were prepared for. As Hargreaves and Fink (2013) stated, “If truth is the first casualty of war, then trust is the first fatality of imposed reform” (p. 508).

In retrospect, we both acknowledged we had not paid enough attention to how the initiative would affect everyone, but neither of us were prepared for the backlash. What impacted me most, on both a personal and professional level, was that the group had confronted the Director about it without first discussing it with the Chair as is a fairly well established practice in our department. Not only had they bypassed me as Chair, but also as a union shop steward by inviting a different shop steward to the discussion to represent them. I later learned from another instructor that some had thought I was so aligned with the Director that it was felt I would not
have represented their concerns fairly. This was a defining set of circumstances for me as Chair and as a shop steward. I had clearly lost their trust.

Trust is not something you can expect; you have to earn it, and I had failed to do that. Devastated, I was ready to resign from both positions. However, after taking some time to reflect on the situation, I decided to step back from the self-pity and try not to take it so personally. I needed a plan. As Solomon and Flores (2001) stated, “trust is cultivated through speech, conversation, commitments and action. Trust is never something ‘already at hand’, it is always a matter of human effort. It can and often must be conscientiously created, not simply taken for granted” (p. 87). I did not reduce my support for the Director, but I did begin to pay more attention to ways I could support the faculty, and through this dreadful experience, I learned a valuable lesson: never take trust for granted. I was determined to earn it back, and eventually, I think I did to some extent because several of those same instructors have since expressed appreciation for my support regarding various other incidents that occurred after that situation. In fact, when the Director recently announced that a new Chair would be assuming this position a few months from now, one of them emailed me to say, “Thank you for your caring and professional support as our the ELC Chair, Suzy. I have appreciated your guidance and leadership on many occasions. You will return to the classroom as an enlightened and very informed teacher, which will contribute significantly to the professional growth of the ELC.”

In the interviews for this paper, I sensed that each Chair had experienced their own hurtful incidents requiring deep and earnest reflection. I assume they worked through it as I did by taking the time for thoughtful, vulnerable self-reflection, confidentially seeking the advice of a trusted friend outside of work, or engaging in further scholarship of practice to try and understand what happened and how they could prevent future misunderstandings. What did I
learn from that unpleasant situation? When someone takes on a position of responsibility or authority, even if the level of authority is vague, as in the case of the Chair position, dealing with conflict is inevitable. There is no point in blaming instructors for not always understanding the decisions a Chair makes or the actions they take because instructors are not seeing things from the same perspective. They are not sitting in the same “hot seat” and they have their own concerns. Admitting mistakes, persevering through to a resolution, and learning from it, in other words, “failing forward” as John Maxwell (2000) calls it, are the only worthwhile options when dealing with difficult situations. What I learned from the Chair experience as a whole was to accept my own limits, to adjust my expectations of others, and to be forever grateful for my loving partner, good friends, and objective colleagues who are always there to listen and support.

**Limitations and Recommendations for Further Study**

There are admittedly certain limitations to this study. The primary research relied on the results of interviews and did not use quantitative methods of research that could have included a wide range of participants. Further, the total number of interviewees, six, was not a large sample. However, I made the decision to restrict the number of participants to a relatively small sample because I estimated it would be manageable given the time it would take to transcribe the interviews (four to six hours each), and to code and analyze the data.

In addition, I acknowledge that there are other variables that affect the validity of this study. For example, the experiences of the participants interviewed is limited to their work as Chairs at one university, VIU, whereas, the experience of Chairs in other universities could be vastly different. Also, gender differences may have influenced the responses, but because out of the six Chairs interviewed, only one was male, such differences are difficult to account for in this study. Furthermore, in the case of the three former Chairs, it has been several years since they
had lived the experience. Thus, faulty memories can be considered one more weakness of the study; however, as the responses and sentiments were remarkably consistent across the board, I believe these Chairs were still able to provide relatively reliable data.

This study provides a reference for anyone considering becoming a Chair and I hope the difficulties identified will not be a deterrent. I would like to encourage other instructors to consider applying for the position at some point in their teaching careers. Instructors should know what they are getting into before putting themselves in a situation they regret. To that end, a further step, which could be taken to help enlighten everyone as to what this role entails, as well as to help new Chairs adjust to their roles, would be for each department to create and develop its own “Chair Handbook.” My reference list includes books written as introductions for new Chairs, and as useful as I have found them, a small booklet written specifically for my department would have been a useful resource. With my own tenure as Chair of my department coming to an end after one more semester, I may finally have the time to take on such a project myself.
References


The Collective Agreement between Vancouver Island University and B.C. Government and Service Employees’ Union (BCGEU) Faculty Local 702 (2014).

The Collective Agreement between Vancouver Island University and the Vancouver Island University Faculty Association (VIUFA) (2014).

Appendix A: Sample Email Recruitment Instrument

Dear (Chair’s name),

I am writing you regarding my request to interview you in support of my research for the Masters of Education in Educational Leadership.

My thesis, “In the Hot Seat: Experiences of University Faculty Members Adjusting to the Role of Department Chair,” aims to investigate the experiences of instructors who became Chairs of their departments. It is my hope that my research will provide a better understanding of the experience of adjusting to this unique leadership role.

I expect we will need approximately 45 minutes for this interview. I will record our conversation for the purpose of accuracy and so that I can be free to listen more intently without taking notes.

Afterwards, I will transcribe the conversation and include excerpts into my paper, taking care to preserve your anonymity. Then, I will invite you to read the paper, or at least the portions based on your responses and will make revisions to anything you may want me to change. After submitting my final draft, I will destroy the recording and the transcripts.

For your reference, attached are the questions I am planning to ask. Also included is a Consent Form for you to sign. I will bring hard copies of them to our interview.

Are you available to meet this week? If so, can you suggest a day and time? Or, if not this week, please let me know a better time. I will reserve a sound-proof editing room in the library (near the IT desk on the 3rd floor) for our conversation. And, allow me to treat us to something from Starbucks to take in with us as we chat!

Thank you again for helping me with this. I really appreciate it and hope I can return the favour to you in some way in the future.

Warm regards,

Suzy Nachtsheim
Appendix B: Letter of Consent

Letter of Consent

Principal Investigator
Suzy Nachtsheim
Master of Education in Educational Leadership
Vancouver Island University
suzy.nachtsheim@viu.ca

Student Supervisor
Rachel Moll
Department of Education
Vancouver Island University
rachel.moll@viu.ca

My name is Suzy Nachtsheim and I am a student in the Master of Education in Educational Leadership at Vancouver Island University (VIU). My research, entitled “In the Hot Seat: Experiences of University Faculty Members Adjusting to the Role of Department Chair,” aims to investigate the experiences of faculty members who were or are currently Chairs of their departments. I am also the Chair of the English Language Centre in the Faculty of International Education at VIU, and it is my hope that my research will provide a better understanding of this unique leadership role.

You are being invited to participate because you are a current (or past) Department Chair. I am requesting your participation in a face-to-face interview for about 45 minutes regarding your Chair experience. If you agree, you would be asked questions concerning your personal and professional experiences with emphasis on factors such as why you chose to take on this role, differences between teaching and doing administrative work, difficulties you encountered when making this transition, rewards and benefits of the position, and your recommendations to others contemplating it.

With your permission, the interview will be audio recorded and later transcribed into writing. At your request, you will be invited to make changes to the transcript as you wish (e.g. if you would like to withdraw a particular statement you made). I will also provide you with a copy of the data analysis for your review so that you can correct or modify my use of your comments, or withdraw comments before I submit it for publication.

All records or your participation would be confidential. Only my supervisor and I will have access to information in which you are identified. The information collected during the interview is likely to be uncontroversial; however, as I will be working with a relatively small sample (six or seven Chairs at VIU) you should be aware there is a potential risk that your answers could indirectly identify you. With your permission, direct quotes will be used in the presentation of the results, but every effort will be made not to include indirectly identifiable information.
Electronic data will be stored on a password-protected computer. Hardcopies of interview transcripts will be stored in a locked file cabinet in my home. Data will be deleted and shredded at the end of the project, approximately May 31st, 2021.

The results of this study will be published in my Master’s thesis, and may also be used for conference publications, presentations, and published in peer-reviewed journals.

Your participation is completely voluntary. You may withdraw from the study for any reason, and without explanation. If you choose to withdraw from the study, all information you provided during the interview would be withdrawn from the study and destroyed. Please note, however, you will not be able to withdraw after two weeks of your having reviewed the transcripts and/or data analysis, and given your final approval of my use of your comments.

**Consent of the Participant**

I have read and understand the information provided above, and hereby consent to participate in this research under the following conditions:

- I consent to the interview being audio recorded. □ Yes □ No
- I consent to being quoted in the research. □ Yes □ No

Participant’s Name ______________________________

Participant’s Signature ______________________________

Date _____________

**Note for Participant**

If you have any concerns about your treatment as a research participant in this study, please contact the VIU Research Ethics Board by telephone at 250-740-6631 or by email at reb@viu.ca.

**Commitment of the Principal Investigator**

I, Suzy Nachtsheim, promise to adhere to the procedures described in this consent form.

Principal Investigator Signature ______________________________

Date _____________
Appendix C: Interview Questions

Introduction

Thank you for participating in this study! Along with the opportunity to reflect on your own experience, I hope you will consider your participation as a way of contributing to knowledge in the field of education.

Below are the questions I would like to discuss with you. You are encouraged to elaborate on any of them. Further, you can choose not to answer some, or a particular one, without explanation. Please read them all before answering as some issues may overlap. In the interest of maintaining confidentiality, please do not provide identifying information about yourself or others (i.e. do not use names or other identifying information).

Questions

1. Tell me about your experience of being a teacher prior to becoming the Chair of your Department. For example, what is your area of expertise? What subject(s) did you teach? How long were you a teacher? Why did you become a teacher in the first place? What did you enjoy or not enjoy about teaching?

2. Next, let’s talk about your Chair experience. What motivated you to become the Chair of your Department?

3. On a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 being the most negative, and 5 being the most positive, overall, how positive was, or has been, your experience as Chair? Please elaborate.

4. What do you consider to be the main differences between teaching and administrating and what do you like or dislike about administrating?

5. What was, or has been, the most difficult aspect(s) of going through the adjustment period of being a Chair?

6. What was, or has been, the most rewarding aspect(s) of being a Chair?

7. How has the experience affected your personal and/or professional self-identity?

8. What did you learn the most from the experience? Is there anything you wished you had done differently?

9. For former Chairs, now teaching, how did the Chair experience inform your teaching? (For current Chairs also currently teaching, how is being Chair informing your teaching?)

10. What advice (suggestions, warnings, or recommendations) do you have for other teachers contemplating taking on the role of Chair?