

## Role Conflict and the Academic Department Chair

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### ABSTRACT

The academic department head or department chair in a university serves an important and complex role as an academic leader and middle manager. This study examined the role of the academic department head at one public university in the southeastern United States using a framework based on location, behavior, and expectations associated with the position. An electronic survey that included closed and open-ended items and assessed sender conflict, inter-role conflict, intra-role conflict, and workload was sent to 27 current and recent department heads. Results are based on 22 department heads who completed the electronic survey. The results indicated that department heads experienced sender conflict, inter-role conflict, and intra-role conflict. Additionally, they reported that the workload associated with the department head role was more than other academic positions that they held. Recommendations based on the results include the use of a support system to address issues such as work-life balance and mental health as well as policy revisions that create a more accurate alignment of assigned workload allocation (e.g., administration, teaching, and research and service) to actual allocation.

**Keywords:** Academic department head, Role conflict, Higher education, Work-life balance, Mental health.

### INTRODUCTION

The academic department head or department chair in a university serves an important and complex role as an academic leader and middle manager that involves a large number of responsibilities ranging from “student affairs and staff wellbeing and productivity, to department governance and finances, and to representing the department to the institution’s wider administration and leadership” [1, p. 2122]. Positioned between those who direct (e.g., dean, provost, and president) and those who deliver on the institution’s mission (e.g., faculty), the academic department head is “the gatekeeper for curriculum changes, budget decisions, hiring decisions, and promotion and tenure processes” [2, p. 500].

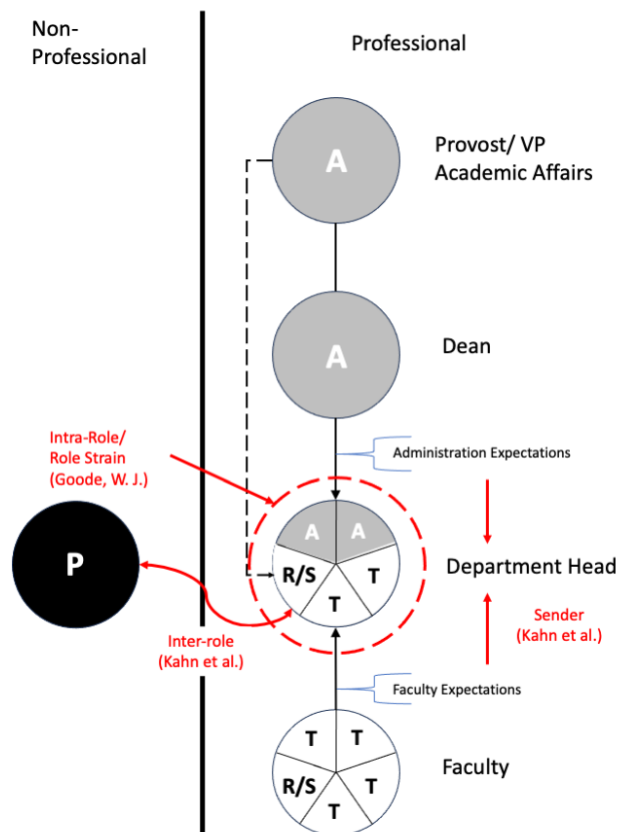
Despite the number and range of responsibilities associated with the academic department head, Gallos and Bolman [3] stated that the authority associated with the academic department head is constrained due to the structure of higher education institutions and shared governance. Subsequently, Ludvik [4] described an academic department head as “endowed with limited power and authority over daily managerial decisions...while stretching scarce resources to forward the dean’s plan and manage the department.” [4, p. 26].

In addition to the responsibilities and limited authority, academic department heads operate within institutions that are presented with unique challenges [5]. Due to these unique challenges, Gmelch [5] stated that the position of academic department head has no counterpart in business or industry. Consequently, research on and frameworks for studying middle managers in business and industry may not generalize to academic department heads. This may have contributed to Gmelch [5] stating that “academic leaders may be the...most misunderstood management position in the world” [5, p. 74] and Berdrow [2] noting that department chairs must be studied within the context of the organization while also considering the individual within the role.

Gross et al. [6] provided a framework for analyzing roles within a system based on three components: (a) location, (b) behavior, and (c) expectations. Location is the basis of the framework and focuses on the placement of the role that is the focus of the analysis (i.e., focal position) within the larger system. Determining the location of the focal position within the system allows for the identification of counter positions. In a hierarchical system, the counter positions include the positions above and below the focal position and assist in defining the role of the focal position. Therefore, if the academic department head is the focal position of the analysis, the relevant counter positions include faculty within the department (subordinate counter position), the dean of the college that includes the department (immediate superordinate position), and the provost or vice president for academic affairs (superordinate position).

Although the focal position is defined by its location within the system, the role of the position is defined by the expectations that are set by counter positions and institutional parameters. Figure 3 illustrates the combination of location and expectations associated with the academic department head in higher education. As shown in Figure 1, the academic department head is situated above faculty and below the academic dean and provost or vice-president for academic affairs. Consequently, the department head is subjected to expectations from subordinate and superordinate counter positions (i.e., faculty and upper administration).

In addition to the location and counter-position expectations, the within-role expectations are illustrated in Figure 1. Using the researchers' current institution as a case example, the institutionally defined workload totals 15 hours per semester. For faculty (the subordinate counter position), the role is defined by expectations related to (a) teaching and (b) research and service. Conversely, the superordinate counter position (dean) is defined only by administrative expectations. For academic department heads, the University assigns 6 hours for department head administrative expectations, 3 hours for research and service expectations, and 6 hours for teaching expectations (usually two 3-credit hour courses). This definition creates three sets of role expectations for the department head while the faculty role is defined by two sets of role expectations and the dean role is defined by only one set of role expectations.



**Figure 1: Role Conflict of Academic Department Head Within a Higher Education Organization**

Figure 1 also illustrates areas of conflict that may be experienced by the department head. Getzels and Guba [7] stated that role conflict occurs when an individual is presented with inconsistent or contradictory expectations to which they cannot conform. Kahn et al. [8] identified multiple types of role conflict including (a) inter-sender and (b) inter-role. Inter-sender conflict occurs when the expectations sent or expressed by one counter-position conflict with the role expectations sent or expressed by another counter-position. A third type of role conflict identified by Kahn et al. [8] is role overload which can result directly from another form of conflict or a composite of multiple forms of conflict. Unlike inter-sender and inter-role conflicts, role overload is manifested within the individual who occupies the position. This aligns with Goode's [9] description of role strain which is based on the assumption that one position consists of multiple roles and the total expectations are over demanding.

In the current framework, inter-sender conflict results from a lack of role consensus between the faculty and dean. Inter-role conflict includes differences in expectations associated with different roles that the focal position occupies, specifically the professional role (e.g., department head) and non-professional role (e.g., family expectations, community involvement, etc.). Role strain/intra-role conflict may occur even though the expectations expressed by the faculty and dean are legitimate (i.e., there is role consensus) and the department head has established a work-life balance. Despite experiencing role consensus, the department head may not have sufficient time or resources to address all expectations.

Consequently, as proposed by Goode [9], fully committing to one set of expectations makes fulfillment of the other set of expectations difficult. Therefore, the department head must continuously make role bargains to meet the expectations.

## METHODS

The population for this study was individuals who were current heads of academic departments or held the position within the previous 2 years and were still employed with the University. Based on these criteria, an electronic survey was designed using Google Forms and distributed to 27 current and former academic department heads. The survey was available for 14 days with a follow-up reminder sent on Day 8. The quantitative data were analyzed using SPSS 29.0 and qualitative data were examined for emerging themes. Each researcher independently reviewed the qualitative responses and developed a coding scheme. After the independent reviews, the researchers discussed the resulting themes and developed a consensus coding scheme that was applied to the qualitative responses.

The 5-section electronic survey was derived from instruments used by Pandey and Kumar [10] and Henning and Weidner [11]. Pandey and Kumar [11] assessed three dimensions of role conflict: (a) within-role, (b) inter-role, and (c) person-role. Henning and Weidner used a modified version of the Athletic Training ACI Role Strain Inventory designed to measure the degree of role strain and 7 subscales: (a) Inter-sender conflict, (b) Intra-sender conflict, (c) Inter-role conflict, (d) Role ambiguity, (e) Role overload, (f) Role incongruity, and (g) Role incompetence. Pandey and Kumar noted that the within-role factor consisted of items related to intra-sender and inter-sender conflicts. Therefore, Pandey and Kumar's within-role items were used to inform items in the Sender section of the current survey.

The survey used in this study included the following sections:

- **Professional demographics:** This section requested information related to the number of years serving as a department head, academic rank, department size, and college in which the department is located. Due to the limited sample size and the researchers' familiarity with the department heads, the department heads had the ability to skip this section or not respond to an item to ensure anonymity.
- **Sender Conflict:** This section consisted of 7 closed-ended items, with three items related to Inter-sender conflict and four items related to Intra-sender conflict. The Inter-sender items focused on the presence of conflict related to differences in expectations of administration and faculty. The Intra-sender items focused on the presence of conflicting expectations within each counter position (i.e., administration and faculty). One open-ended item was included that provided department heads to describe the impact of their department head expectations on their non-job expectations. One open-ended item was included that provided department heads to describe the expectations of their dean and upper administration compared to the expectations of their faculty.
- **Inter-Role Conflict:** This section consisted of 6 closed-ended items that focused on conflicts between professional (i.e., work) and personal (i.e., life) expectations. One open-ended item was included that provided department heads to describe the impact of their department head expectations on their non-job expectations.
- **Intra-Role Conflict:** This section consisted of 8 items that focused on the conflicts among the defined expectation/responsibility categories associated with a department

head role (i.e., administration, teaching, and research and service). One open-ended item was included that provided department heads to describe their allocation of time to administrative, teaching, research, and service expectations.

- **Workload:** This section consisted of 4 items that focused on the overall perception of the workload associated with the department head role. One open-ended item was included that provided department heads the opportunity to compare their workload as a department head to the workload of other academic positions.
- For the Sender conflict, Inter-role conflict, Intra-role conflict, and Workload sections, the closed-ended items used a 5-point response scale ranging from 1 (*Strongly Disagree*) to 5 (*Strongly Agree*). The midpoint label was *Neither Agree Nor Disagree*.

## RESULTS

Twenty-two current and recent department heads responded to the survey for an 81.5% response rate. Of the 22 responses, 17 provided demographic information. The results indicate that responses were received from all academic colleges. Arts, Humanities, and Social Sciences, which includes nine academic departments, had the largest number of department heads (27.3%). Conversely, Business, Education, and Nursing and Health Sciences, with three, two, and three departments, respectively, each represented 9.1% of the responses. Concerning the number of faculty, the results indicate that the department heads represented small, medium, and large departments. Likewise, the results illustrate that the department heads represented the range from new (< 1 year) to experienced (more than 10 years).

Regarding the rank of the department heads, a review of the population information indicated that the distribution of rank was: (a) Instructor (3, 11.1%), Assistant Professor (2, 7.4%), Associate Professor (9, 33.3%), and Full Professor (13, 48.1%). Therefore, 88.9% of the population held a tenure-track appointment. Of the responding department heads, 2 (9.1%) held the rank of Instructor and did not hold tenure, and 15 department heads (68.2%) had the rank of Associate or Full Professor. Based on a comparison of the population distribution and the identified ranks, the percentage of department heads who were Assistant Professor or higher ranged from 86.4% to 90.9%. The professional demographic results are presented in Table 1.

**Table 1: Professional Demographics Frequency and Percent**

Item	n	%
College		
Arts, Humanities, and Social Sciences	6	27.3
Business	2	9.1
Education	2	9.1
Nursing and Health Sciences	2	9.1
Science and Technology	5	22.7
No Response	5	22.7
Number of Faculty in Department		
< 10	1	4.5
11-15	2	9.1
16-20	5	22.7
20-25	3	13.6
26-30	3	13.6

> 30	3	13.6
No Response	5	22.7
Years as Department Head		
< 1 year	3	13.6
1-2 years	2	9.1
3-4 years	3	13.6
5-6 years	3	13.6
7-8 years	1	4.5
9-10 years	1	4.5
> 10 years	4	18.2
No Response	5	22.7
Rank		
Instructor	2	9.1
Associate Professor	6	27.3
Full Professor	9	40.9
No Response	5	22.7
Tenured		
Yes	15	68.2
No	2	9.1
No Response	5	22.7

### Sender Conflict

Sender conflict consisted of items related to inter-sender conflict (i.e., conflict resulting from expectations of upper administration versus faculty) and intra-sender conflict (i.e., conflict resulting from differing expectations with administration or faculty). Overall, the mean response across the 7 items was 3.27 ( $SD = .84$ ), which indicated a level of agreement with the statements that were not statistically significantly higher than the midpoint (3),  $t(21) = 1.48$ ,  $p = .154$ . When the intra-sender items were examined separately, the results indicated that the mean intra-sender conflict ( $M = 3.13$ ,  $SD = .89$ ) was not statistically significantly higher than the midpoint (3),  $t(21) = 0.66$ ,  $p = .515$ ,  $d = .14$ . Conversely, when the inter-sender items were examined, the results indicated that the mean of the inter-sender items ( $M = 3.45$ ,  $SD = .95$ ) was statistically significantly higher than the midpoint (3),  $t(21) = 2.25$ ,  $p = .035$ ,  $d = .48$ . Finally, when the inter-sender items were compared to the intra-sender items, a statistically significant difference was identified,  $t(21) = 2.23$ ,  $p = .037$ ,  $d = .475$ .

Although the overall scores indicate a difference in levels of inter-sender and intra-sender conflict, examination of the individual items provides a more nuanced understanding of these issues. The frequency and percent of responses for the individual items related to Sender Conflict are presented in Table 2. The four Intra-Sender items included two items related to administration and two items related to faculty expectations. Less than 50% of the department heads (40.9%) agreed that they sometimes received conflicting instructions from their administration. Conversely, regarding faculty expectations, 54.6% of the department heads indicated that their faculty have conflicting expectations, and 59.1% indicated that fulfilling the conflicting faculty expectations is challenging.

Among the inter-sender items, 45.5% of the department heads indicated that there were conflicting expectations between their administration and faculty. However, 72.7% of the

department heads agreed that it was challenging to fulfill conflicting expectations of their administration and faculty. Additionally, 54.6% of the department heads indicated that they have been asked by their administration to do things that are not in the best interest of faculty (Item 6).

**Table 2: Frequency and percent of responses for Sender Conflict items**

	<b>SD</b>	<b>D</b>	<b>NDA</b>	<b>A</b>	<b>SA</b>
<b>Item</b>	<b>n</b> <b>%</b>	<b>n</b> <b>%</b>	<b>n</b> <b>%</b>	<b>n</b> <b>%</b>	<b>n</b> <b>%</b>
It is challenging to fulfill conflicting expectations of my administration and faculty.	- -	3 13.60%	3 13.60%	9 40.90%	7 31.80%
I sometimes receive conflicting instructions from my administration.	1 4.50%	7 31.80%	5 22.70%	5 22.70%	4 18.20%
My administration's expectations of me conflict with those of my faculty.	- -	8 36.40%	4 18.20%	8 36.40%	2 9.10%
When I have multiple tasks assigned to me by my dean, I am in a dilemma to select one of them to take up first.	6 27.30%	8 36.40%	4 18.20%	3 13.60%	1 4.50%
My faculty hold conflicting expectations for me.	1 4.50%	4 18.20%	5 22.70%	8 36.40%	4 18.20%
My administration asks me to do things that may not be in the best interests of my faculty.	1 4.50%	6 27.30%	3 13.60%	10 45.50%	2 9.10%
It is challenging to fulfill conflicting expectations within my faculty.	2 9.10%	3 13.60%	4 18.20%	7 31.80%	6 27.30%

Note: SD = Strongly Disagree, D = Disagree, NDA = Neither Disagree, A = Agree, SA = Strongly Agree

The open-ended item prompted department heads to discuss the difference in expectations of them by their administration and faculty. Eighteen (81.8%) department heads responded to the item; however, the majority of responses focused on the differing priorities of administrators and faculty rather than their expectations of the department head. Although this perspective emerged from a review of the responses, it was explicitly noted by two department heads who stated, "There are differing priorities between the two groups" and "Faculty and Administration often have different views on how [University] should educate." As noted by one department head, "Faculty have a more self-centered perspective and are focused on low compensation and workload issues." Conversely, the priorities of the "upper administration are largely fiscally motivated and compliance-based."

One example of the conflicting perspectives concerned workload. As noted by one department head, "I'm sure the administration would like to see larger class sizes so that the revenue per CH [credit hour] is increased." However, "Faculty would like to see 30 or less." Overall, "Faculty mostly want administrators to leave them alone and let them do their jobs as professionals" and "be trusted." However, "administrators want to ensure quality" and "cannot afford to trust blindly." This results in "expecting faculty to do time-consuming tasks that don't improve instruction" and "collectively requires a lot of time from faculty and they don't feel that is worthy use of their time."

Within the 18 responses, 28 phrases focused on administration while 17 phrases were coded for faculty priorities. Of the 28 administrative phrases, 22 (78.6%) were coded as having a

positive or negative tone. Of the 22 coded phrases, 16 (72.7%) were determined to have a negative tone, while 6 (27.3%) were positive. Negative statements are demonstrated by the following:

- “The upper administration has unrealistic expectations of my faculty and what they should do.”
- “Upper admin doesn’t seem to want to ever be the ‘bearer of bad news’ so when I have to deliver news that isn’t great to my faculty, I’m told to not say “upper admin said . . .”
- “The upper administration is not aware of the ramifications of the super weak students we are now admitting.”

Conversely, positive statements directed toward the administration included:

- “The dean's expectations are both challenging and reasonable”
- “My dean's expectations are consistent with the best interest of the College and our students”
- “My Dean has high, but reasonable, standards”.

Of the 17 faculty-related comments, only 9 (52.9%) were coded to reflect either a positive or negative tone. Of the 9 coded phrases, 5 (55.6%) were positive and 4 (44.4%) were negative. Positive comments included references to the department head understanding the workload of faculty (e.g., “faculty who are already overloaded with teaching just don't have the bandwidth to add more”) and faculty understanding expectations that the department head must meet for the administration (e.g., “Faculty are able to understand/accept things that I must do to satisfy the administration”).

The negative faculty comments included references to accountability (e.g., “some faculty detest being held accountable or asked to do anything they consider ‘extra’ like recruitment events, etc.”), expectations within faculty (e.g., “Faculty expectations vary greatly and are often based on the individual’s perspective.”), and lack of understanding of the department head’s administrative role (e.g., “faculty misunderstanding of everything else that goes on in administrative tasks”).

The final theme that emerged from the responses included statements related to the role of the department head. As noted previously, one department head stated that upper administration does not want to be the bearer of bad news, consequently, a second department head stated, “The most challenging part of the position for DHs is that they often have to deliver news that will not be popular to faculty even if there is a legitimate reason for the policy or action.” The department head role was described as “a classic middle management position where you are often caught between competing goals of those above and below you” who “must play intermediary between the deans and the faculty.” The department head must “advocate for the faculty to our dean and then turn around and enforce the dean's decision.”

### **Inter-role Conflict**

Inter-role conflict was assessed by six quantitative items and one qualitative item. Overall, the mean response across the six items was 3.64 ( $SD = .92$ ) which indicates general agreement related to conflict associated with different roles. Additionally, the mean was statistically significantly above the midpoint (3),  $t(21) = 3.24$ ,  $p = .004$ ,  $d = .69$ ). As shown in Table 3, the percentage of department heads who expressed agreement was greater than 50% for five of



the six items. Two of the three items with the highest percentage of agreement (Items 2 and 5), concerned the impact of the department head role on the time available for personal interests and extracurricular activities. Item 3 also received agreement from over 75% of the responses and concerned the difficulty in disconnecting from the department head role.

**Table 3: Frequency and percent of responses for Inter-role Conflict items**

	SD	D	NDA	A	SA
Item	n %	n %	n %	n %	n %
At times I feel helpless that I cannot strike a balance between my work and family expectations.	2 9.10%	6 27.30%	1 4.50%	10 45.50%	3 13.60%
My personal interests are neglected due to my involvement with work.	- -	4 18.20%	1 4.50%	9 40.90%	8 36.40%
The expectations of my job make it difficult to be relaxed all the time at home.	- -	2 9.10%	3 13.60%	10 45.50%	7 31.80%
My job makes it difficult for me to enjoy my cultural interests.	1 4.50%	4 18.20%	4 18.20%	9 40.90%	4 18.20%
My job gives me little time for extra-curricular activities.	- -	3 13.60%	1 4.50%	14 63.60%	4 18.20%
I feel guilty about neglecting my family due to my job expectations.	3 13.60%	2 9.10%	6 27.30%	9 40.90%	2 9.10%

Note: SD = Strongly Disagree, D = Disagree, NDA = Neither Disagree, A = Agree, SA = Strongly Agree

The open-ended item allowed department heads to describe the impact of their department head role on their non-job expectations. Responses were provided by 17 (77.3%) of the 22 department heads. Two major themes emerged: (a) impact and (b) time. The statements related to impact were further coded as negative, neutral, or positive, and the time theme was further coded based on references to working after hours or 24 hours/7 days per week.

Fourteen phrases were coded for the impact theme, of which 10 (71.4%) reflected a negative impact of the department head's job on non-job expectations and 4 (28.6%) reflected a neutral impact. No phrases were coded to reflect a positive impact of the department head's job on non-job expectations. The majority of the negative impact phrases were generic. For example,

- "I have little time for anything else"
- "If you're a good DH, you don't have much left for anything else"
- "The job is too big to excel at work and at home"
- "I have to give up non-job things to complete my work tasks."

However, other statements identified specific impacts of the department head's role on non-job expectations:

- "By the weekend, I'm so exhausted I can barely do things that are necessary like go to Walmart."
- "The first thing to go are self-care items. For example, I would like to work out more. But working out would mean that I am neglecting family time, contributing to the function of the home, or sleep."
- "It does however need to be managed effectively to avoid burnout."

- “the biggest impact is rarely being able to achieve full disconnect from work, prohibiting true relaxation at any time.”

The common theme among the four neutral impact statements was the ability to establish a work-life balance. For example, one department stated, “After 20+ years I have learned to strike a balance.” However, the department head also stated that they were not seeking advancement, which relieved most of their stress. Other department heads stated, “I find it easy to manage my work-life balance” and “My family simply reordered our schedule and do things when time permits.”

The second major theme focused on references to the amount of time allocated to the department head role. Of the 14 phrases related to time, 7 (50.0%) specifically mentioned working after hours. This category included references to working beyond the normal weekday business hours (e.g., “I put in 8-15 hours (probably more) of overtime each week” and “It is not uncommon for me to leave my office at midnight at least once a week”) and weekends (e.g., “at least 4-8 hours of my weekends” and “an academic administrative position often eats into evenings and weekends”). The second component of time included 5 (35.7%) phrases that described the department head as a 24 hour a day/7 days a week position. These included phrases such as: (a) “With time - you become the role”, (b) “It follows you everywhere”, and (c) “A DH is never ‘off the clock’.”

With respect to time, one department head summarized by stating, “It is impossible to complete all tasks during normal work hours in this position” and another was prompted to state “I believe DH is one of the most demanding positions on campus.”

### Intra-role Conflict

Intra-role conflict was assessed by eight quantitative items and one qualitative item. The results indicate that the mean response across the eight items was 3.18 (SD = .80), indicating a slight overall agreement. However, the results also indicated that the mean was not statistically significantly above the midpoint (3),  $t(21) = 1.06$ ,  $p = .30$ ,  $d = .23$ . Table 4 illustrates the frequency and percent of responses to each of the intra-role conflict items. Three of the four items that resulted in the highest percentage of agreement (Items 2, 4, and 8) addressed the interaction of the three main areas of responsibility for a department head: (a) administration, (b) teaching, and (c) research. The only item to which over 50% of the department heads expressed agreement was Item 4. The results indicated strong agreement among the department heads (77.3%) that the administrative expectations interfered with their research expectations. The results indicate that the department heads prioritize their administrative and teaching expectations at the expense of research expectations.

**Table 4: Frequency and percent of responses for Intra-role Conflict items**

	SD	D	NDA	A	SA
Item	n %	n %	n %	n %	n %
It is difficult to cope with the diversity of my job expectations.	1 4.50%	8 36.40%	5 22.70%	4 18.20%	4 18.20%
My teaching and research expectations interfere with my administrative expectations.	2 9.10%	5 22.70%	4 18.20%	8 36.40%	3 13.60%

The work I do is not contributing toward achieving my professional goals.	5 22.70%	7 31.80%	4 18.20%	6 27.30%	- -
My administrative expectations interfere with my research expectations.	- -	2 9.10%	3 13.60%	11 50.00%	6 27.30%
It is difficult to cope with the number of expectations of my job.	1 4.50%	7 31.80%	3 13.60%	9 40.90%	2 9.10%
My idea of what my job should be is very different from what it really is.	1 4.50%	5 22.70%	8 36.40%	4 18.20%	4 18.20%
I feel torn between the administrative and academic expectations of my job.	2 9.10%	6 27.30%	5 22.70%	6 27.30%	3 13.60%
My administrative expectations interfere with my teaching expectations.	1 4.50%	6 27.30%	4 18.20%	7 31.80%	4 18.20%

Note: SD = Strongly Disagree, D = Disagree, NDA = Neither Disagree, A = Agree, SA = Strongly Agree

The open-ended item provided department heads the opportunity to describe their allocation of time devoted to administrative, teaching, research, and service expectations. Responses were provided by 15 (68.2%) of the 22 department heads and resulted in two major themes: (a) allocation and (b) impact. Eight (53.3%) of the allocation phrases indicated that the majority of time was devoted to administrative expectations. Of the 8 responses, three were general statements indicating that the majority of time was devoted to administrative expectations, including one department head who compared the department head reassigned time to actual workload by stating “It [DH reassignment] is put in as a ‘6-hour’ release, but it is definitely more than that when it comes to actual workload.” However, four department heads provided their estimated allocation percentages, and the administrative expectations accounted for 80% to “almost 100% of my time.”

The second major theme associated with the allocation of time focused on the impact of the diversity of expectations. Eleven department heads provided statements that addressed the impact of one set of department head expectations on another set of expectations. Although two department heads indicated that balancing the expectations is manageable, eight department heads identified negative impacts of one set of expectations on at least one other set of expectations. The area most mentioned as being negatively impacted was research, which was mentioned by seven of the eight department heads. This is reflected by comments such as:

- “Research in particular has taken a severe hit. It's depressing that this isn't realized”
- “It was very difficult to manage to fit research in around trying to make sure that I was teaching my class well and keeping up with administrative duties”
- “I'm publishing a book this semester which I wrote before becoming department head and I can see finding the same amount of time to write another will be difficult in the future”

Although the majority of impact comments identified research as the area that is most negatively impacted, one department referred to the general impact of the variety and number of expectations and stated “I honestly just jump from one fire to the next. Whatever is the most pressing deadline is what gets my attention. That means I'm preparing for class hours before teaching, doing administrative tasks the day they are due, etc. There is no way to be forward thinking.”

## Workload

Workload was assessed by four quantitative items and one qualitative item. The results indicate that the mean response across the four items was 3.88 ( $SD = 0.76$ ), indicating overall agreement. The results also indicate that the mean was statistically significantly higher than the midpoint (3),  $t(21) = 5.41$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $d = 1.15$ . Table 5 illustrates the frequency and percent of responses to each of the workload items. For three of the four items, the percentage of department heads who expressed agreement ranged from 68.2 (Item 4) to 86.4 (Item 4). The responses to these items indicate that the department heads strongly agreed that there was not adequate time to meet all the expectations and work-related activities had to be completed after regular working hours. Consequently, 77.3% of the department heads reported feeling physically or mentally drained from work at the end of the day. However, despite the findings from these three items, the department heads also demonstrated their commitment to fulfilling expectations with only 27.2% stating that the amount of work interferes with the quality of their work.

**Table 5: Frequency and percent of responses for Workload items**

	SD	D	NDA	A	SA
Item	n %	n %	n %	n %	n %
I have to complete work-related activities after regular working hours in order to meet expectations.	- -	2 9.10%	1 4.50%	4 18.20%	15 68.20%
I feel physically or emotionally drained from my work at the end of the day	- -	1 4.50%	4 18.20%	10 45.50%	7 31.80%
The amount of work I have to do interferes with how well it gets done.	- -	8 36.40%	8 36.40%	5 22.70%	1 4.50%
I feel like I do not have adequate time to meet my administrative, teaching, and research expectations.	- -	1 4.50%	6 27.30%	6 27.30%	9 40.90%

The open-ended item provided an opportunity for department heads to compare their workload to other roles they held in academia. Fourteen department heads provided responses that generated three major themes: (a) department head workload is more, (b) department head workload is different, and (c) impact of department head workload. The most frequently coded theme was that the workload associated with the department head role was greater than other positions the department heads had held in academia. One department head simply stated that the department head role was “more work” while other department heads indicated a much larger workload by stating:

- “The workload is at least quadrupled what my other administrative positions have been, including associate dept head and professor”
- “The department head workload far exceeds that of an undergraduate coordinator or instructor with an overload”
- “Serving as DH is far more demanding than any faculty position.”

Like the comparison of workloads, with regard to the nature of the position, one department head simply stated that “it is a unique role.” Other department heads described specific differences, such as:

- “This is a ‘buck stops here’ position. If something needs to be done that is outside of the normal teaching duties of faculty, it usually becomes the DH's responsibility.”

- “It is just constant.”
- “It provides much less flexibility as compared to other academic appointments I have held.”

Finally, five department heads included statements that reflected the impact of the workload on:

- decision making (“I had to be sure that I was making decisions with the department in mind rather than myself in mind.”)
- daily schedule (“it is almost impossible to know what we are going to be doing each day” and “needing to frequently switch tasks due to urgency of a situation results in inefficient time use. There is little ‘uninterrupted time’ needed to efficiently complete tasks requiring deep thinking”)
- well-being (“sometimes having to listen to all the issues and problems between faculty and students, faculty and their peers can be draining”).

## DISCUSSION

The findings related to Sender Conflict suggest there are differing priorities between administration and faculty. This difference, which can be described as a lack of role consensus, can become a source of inter-sender conflict for the academic department head. Although, the findings highlighted a difference in priorities, many of the open-ended responses that reflected a negative tone toward administration used upper administration. Conversely, the majority of positive administration comments reference the department head’s dean. This suggests that the difference in priorities is magnified as the role’s position moves farther away from the faculty role within the system.

In addition to inter-sender conflict, the results indicated the presence of intra-sender conflict. However, this was more prevalent among faculty expectations than administrative expectations. This is likely due to academic department heads having only one direct supervisor. Therefore, intra-sender conflict from the administration is most likely to occur when upper administration expectations are communicated down the *chain of command* through the Dean. If the Dean adds additional expectations (e.g., different deadlines, etc.), this can create confusion for the department head and faculty concerning which set of expectations to follow. Conversely, regardless of department size, each department head is likely to supervise a faculty with diverse interests and expectations of the department head.

Concerning Inter-role Conflict, the department heads reported a significant level of agreement that their role extends beyond the normal workday and impacts their non-professional activities. Specifically, the results suggest that the department head role prompts individuals to forego personal interests, including self-care. Unfortunately, as one department head noted, “Most people realize that this is part of the job and know this before committing to the role.” The department heads also acknowledged the continuous availability that is associated with the department head role, which further contributes to potential inter-role conflict.

Intra-role conflict focused on the interaction of the three primary expectations of academic department heads: (a) administrative, (b) teaching, and (c) research and service. The results suggested a significant amount of conflict occurs as each of these areas competes for the time

and resources available to the department head. Despite accounting for only 40% of a department head's workload, department heads reported that administrative tasks account for the majority of their time, with some reporting as much as 80% to almost 100% of their time devoted to the administrative aspects of their role. The lack of alignment between the workload allocation and actual time commitment most commonly manifested in a reduction of scholarly productivity. In other words, department heads were more likely to sacrifice expectations that would only impact themselves (e.g., forgo promotion, etc.) to preserve their commitments to administrative expectations and students through their teaching.

The final issue that was examined in this study focused on a comparison of the workload of department head compared to other academic positions. This issue produced the highest overall level of agreement with department heads routinely stating that the workload associated with the department was greater than other academic positions. However, the results also indicate that department heads are not willing to sacrifice the quality of their performance. The unwillingness to sacrifice the quality of their performance could be the stimulus that leads to the need to work beyond normal business hours, which contributes to sacrificing non-job activities and the physical or emotional toll reported by many department heads.

### **RECOMMENDATIONS**

Because academic department heads often enter the role with limited leadership training, the development of a support system could reduce the stress associated with navigating the various sources of conflict. The presence of differing priorities between administrators and faculty and among faculty supports the need for increased communication that can result in an alignment of priorities between the two role sets and result in a more positive working environment for the department head. The increased communication could also allow faculty to better understand the factors that department heads must consider when making administrative decisions. This system can also include resources designed for department heads to manage their work-life balance, including time management and mental health, and reduce the level of inter-role conflict. The time management resources can also assist with intra-role conflicts. However, as one department stated, "It is almost impossible to know what we are going to be doing each day." Consequently, addressing the intra-role conflicts may be the most challenging aspect of a support system.

Along with the development of a support system, policies can be revised to provide flexible schedules and address after-hours work and expectations. The inability to disconnect from work and manage the work-life balance has the potential to result in burnout among department heads, which could result in more frequent turnover and less stability within departments. As noted previously, there is a misalignment between the percentage of workload assigned to administrative expectations and the actual allocation of time. This is an area in which policy could be reviewed and adjusted, either universally or individually based on the department head's expectations. The percent of administrative workload could be increased to 60% for all department heads. Subsequently, the remaining 40% could be negotiated. Therefore, department heads who have achieved tenure and promotion may allocate all 40% to teaching (i.e., teach two courses). Alternatively, a department head who remains active in scholarly activity may decide to allocate 20% to research and service and the remaining 20% to teaching (i.e., teach one course). Finally, if a department head oversees a department with a

large number of faculty and students, additional adjustments could be negotiated to accurately reflect their actual allocation of time.

## CONCLUSION

Despite experiencing multiple types of conflict, department heads expressed a commitment to the quality of their performance. However, as one department head stated, "All DHs need some help as it relates to workload, realistic expectations, and quality of life." Without a mechanism to assist department heads, either through a support system or policy revisions, more department heads will likely adhere to the same view as one department head who stated, "I look forward to stepping down from the DH position so I have time to breathe."

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