

## **ACADEMIC RECEIVERSHIP AS ALIEN RULE<sup>\*</sup>**

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Academic receivership – a relatively rare event in which a departmental chair is imposed from the outside by a dean or provost when the department is judged unable to govern itself effectively – is an instance of alien rule within the academy. In this paper we explore the question of what aspects of identity make an academic leader “alien”, the conditions under which outsiders are chosen to lead academic departments, the reasons for departmental preferences for leaders of “one’s own kind”, and why the disciplinary affinity of a leader might matter. Additionally, we explore the question of why there is such a truncated market for academic leadership of departments. To inform our analysis, we draw upon case studies of receivership at a small number of universities.

## Academic Receivership as Alien Rule

Academic receivership – a relatively rare event in which a departmental chair is imposed from the outside by a dean or provost when the department is judged unable to govern itself effectively – is an instance of alien rule within the academy. In one of the few articles on the subject, Charlotte Allen wrote, “Receivership may be academe’s dirtiest word...receivership is a shameful secret, a dark blot on academic reputation and institutional self-image.”<sup>1</sup> Strong words indeed to describe instances in which an anthropology department is chaired by an historian and a literature department chaired by a linguist. In this paper, we explore the question of what makes an academic leader “alien”, the conditions which may increase the probability that outsiders are chosen to lead academic departments, why disciplinary affinity might matter, the possible reasons for faculty preferences for leaders of “one’s own kind”, and what motivates alien rulers to accept the mantle of leadership.

As with nationalism, in which grievances are given voice in nationalist terms principally under conditions of alien rule<sup>2</sup>, academic receivership may turn the universal language of academic grievances into something with a distinctly disciplinary tone. Yet as with nationalism, the veneer may also represent something with deep meaning, and it is that which we seek to understand.

It is important to note that there is no systematic data on receivership and few analytic treatments. We found journalistic accounts, mostly in local (campus) sources, and some in places like the now-defunct magazine, *Lingua Franca*. Using the power of internet search engines, we have identified scores of internal university documents from Faculty Senate and Academic Council meeting minutes to personal faculty blogs. We have augmented these scattered reports with in-depth interviews with three colleagues who have served as chairs of departments other than their own; namely, who have served as alien rulers. We have also gathered anecdotes, but not in any systematic fashion.

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<sup>1</sup> Charlotte Allen, “As Bad as It Gets: Three Dark Tales from the Annals of Academic Receivership,” *Lingua Franca* 8:2 (March 1998): 52-59.

<sup>2</sup> Michael Hechter, *Containing Nationalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

## The Risk of Receivership

What marks an academic department as ripe for receivership? In casual, journalistic accounts, the story line follows a certain progression: First, the department is marked by strife that permeates faculty relationships.<sup>3</sup> Second, the faculty can no longer agree upon whom to hire, tenure or select as chair. This in-fighting leads to poorly managed tenure and promotion cases and squandered opportunities. Soon, the faculty collectively find themselves unable to come to consensus on any matters at all, including programs beneficial to students. The fights become increasingly bitter and divisive and, perhaps more importantly, publicly visible. In response, the dean or provost becomes fed up and appoint a leader whom he or she trusts from outside the unit. With the appointment of an alien chair, the relative balance of power and authority shifts with respect to key decisions and control over resources, including faculty positions.

The first chapters of this story, however, should seem quite familiar to faculty in any academic department: Strife among faculty and disputes about the value of different kinds of work are quite common. Yet receivership is rare. We suspect, therefore, that there must be distinctive characteristics of a department or unusual precipitating conditions that propel a department from merely difficult and ineffective – as well as a thorn in the side of the dean – to a candidate for receivership.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Not all examples of alien rule are marked by strife. In occasional instances, a department with a largely junior faculty may intentionally seek an outside chair, a kind of alien rule without receivership.

<sup>4</sup> Though the threat usually remains latent, some programs slated for receivership have come perilously close to being targeted for elimination. Receivership is intended by administrators as a final opportunity for the faculty to “get its act together” or risk more serious consequences of merger or program closure. At the University of Tennessee, lessons learned from the School of Planning’s close call with elimination read like an advice manual for avoiding receivership: “don’t let internal tensions affect the efficacy of the degree program, student recruitment or other key matters. If the program is under threat, try to work out your differences within the institution.” Work hard to foster a constructive dialogue with administration, rather than relying on confrontation and political end runs that undermine good faith efforts to solve problems. In his study of threats to planning programs’ existence, Dennis Gale concluded that the most important strategy for preventing program elimination “is through communicating, on an ongoing basis, the program’s contributions and value to its various constituencies.” Dennis E. Gale, “Threatened Planning Schools: Lessons from Experience.” Association of Collegiate Schools of Planning.

## Departmental Characteristics

Although the information about receivership is spotty, one differentiating condition between those departments that have been marked for receivership and those that have not is type of field. There is no comprehensive list of instances of receivership, but some kinds of departments repeatedly appear, such as English and political science, whereas others, such as chemistry or physics, appear rarely.<sup>5</sup> In this observation are hints about that which puts a department at risk of receivership.<sup>6</sup>

The first characteristic is that departments vulnerable to receivership are marked by contested disciplinary identities or transcend customary divisional structures (e.g., humanities or social sciences). In some cases, they are – as in the case of American Ethnic Studies or Women Studies– departments that are not rooted in a single discipline at all. In other cases, the departments embody disciplines that are undergoing dramatic changes in definition, as in Anthropology or English. In these fields, the scope of study and intellectual paradigms are hotly contested. The boundaries of departmental identity are neither set by internal norms nor external ones, therefore.

Consider the case of the Anthropology Department at Columbia University. Their departmental strife mirrored a shift in the field from a classic conception of the ideal anthropologist, a generalist knowledgeable about multiple subfields, to a modernist conception in which the ideal anthropologist was one who specialized.<sup>7</sup> Disciplinary redefinition can also

<sup>5</sup> We know, for example, that the Indiana State University's Department of Physics was put into receivership during the 2001-02 academic year, filed a grievance through the Faculty Senate, and the receivership was rescinded. See <[http://www.indstate.edu/facsenate/minaby2001dec\\_13.htm](http://www.indstate.edu/facsenate/minaby2001dec_13.htm)>.

<sup>6</sup> It appears that reconfiguration and merger in the sciences may be more common than receivership, although this is difficult to substantiate. In the biological sciences, for instance, there are two contrasting cases. At the University of Washington, botany, zoology, and the undergraduate program in biology merged voluntarily, and a chair was selected from the former zoology department. At Berkeley, however, the Chancellor, "On the recommendation of the University's leading biologists, put all of the biology departments at Berkeley into a kind of receivership under the authority of the Advisory Council – a condition in which the departments no longer have the ordinary degree of control..." Martin Trow, "Biology at Berkeley: A Case Study of Reorganization and Its Costs and Benefits" (Spring 1999), <[Ishi.lib.Berkeley.edu/cshe/publications/papers/papers/PP.Trow.Biology.1.99.pdf](http://Ishi.lib.Berkeley.edu/cshe/publications/papers/papers/PP.Trow.Biology.1.99.pdf)>.

<sup>7</sup> Allen, "As Good as it Gets."

lead departments to incorporate an expansive array of subfields, such as large English departments with “folklore, ESL, composition and rhetoric, cinema studies, traditional literary criticism, creative writing, theory, and so on.”<sup>8</sup> Given the uncertainty that accompanies this level of diversity in intellectual interests, decisions which are routinely taken by departmental faculties – the requirements for degrees, promotion criteria and hiring priorities principal among them – become problematic in these unwieldy, heterodox entities, and can lead to ideologically charged debates and unpredictable outcomes.

The second characteristic of departments at risk for receivership is that they have become misaligned with University priorities. Almost any change in university-level strategic priorities, whether it be in research or education, can unleash confusion or backlash at the departmental level. But a department that is clear about its direction typically can find a way to articulate its contribution to the broader institutional agenda. Not so for a department lacking leadership and a clear intellectual or professional identity. For example, if a university declares that undergraduate education must become more responsive to students and efficient, departments have multiple ways to respond. They might develop new, innovative programs to attract top students, streamline major requirements to shorten time to degree, or mount large classes to increase access. These require some degree of faculty collective action and, possibly, individual sacrifice to benefit the common good, which, in turn, requires some degree of group solidarity. Other departments might argue effectively that they should be treated as an exception (e.g., music performance should not be held to general efficiency standards), or that they have a paradigm that is an effective and innovative alternative to whatever is being proposed institutionally (e.g., architectural design education as a model of student-centered inquiry). A department that cannot pull itself together to respond to new challenges may not only bear the consequences internally, but may also come to the attention of the next level of administration as an unwelcome instance of failure to respond. Those units which appear to resist institutional mandates lose standing in the resource allocation process and increase their vulnerability to receivership.

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<sup>8</sup> Richard Edwards, “The Academic Department: How Does It Fit into the University Reform Agenda?” *Change* 31:5 (September/October 1999): 19.

A third characteristic is connected to academic quality. Departments with long histories of excellence, faced with new disciplinary and/or institutional requirements, seem particularly challenged in responding. They may be loathe to change that which has been an instrumental ingredient in their past recipe for excellence, fearing that to do so would undermine the basis of their reputation. Or the new demands may upset a delicate political balance that was critical to harmonious relations, hence to collective decision-making. Other members of such departments, sensitive to external shifts, convinced of the inevitability of change, and able to see an alternative future of excellence, may challenge the more conservative views of their colleagues, leading to an internal battle. This faction might well (secretly) welcome alien rule, having been a latent and silenced minority group prior to the imposition of alien rule and the entry of the department into receivership. In this, there comes to be a strategic alliance between higher administration and one faction within the department, further exacerbating internal tensions on the way to shifting the balance of power to bring the unit into line with the administration's transformation agenda.

Another variation on the relationship between quality and vulnerability to receivership results from a weak department faced with a new set of disciplinary and/or institutional requirements. These departments, though weak, are often marked by a relatively high degree of internal consensus. This consensus is akin to that of workers who agree on a slower rate of work than management desires of them. When pressures from the outside threaten to disrupt internal norms, for example around issues of teaching loads or research productivity, collegiality may break down for the same kinds of reasons as in a top department. While some members of the department certainly will defend local customs, other faculty are likely to recognize that the status quo will not do, and move for change, and in so doing, end up in an alliance with higher administration. In fact, some are likely to recognize that their own personal productivity will be rewarded by the administration, and resent that their colleagues' lower standards are undermining the status of the department and are obstructing its access to institutional resources. These differences often lead to a split among faculty in their alignment with and resistance to externally imposed leadership.

A fourth characteristic arises from isolation of a department, either from other units in the same university, or its own discipline. Isolation creates insularity; insularity separates units from the sorts of evolutionary changes



which are typically absorbed in a more gradual fashion by better connected departments. When a new subfield arises, faculties connected to a larger disciplinary world match existing strengths to external opportunities. They can also quickly mobilize to recruit faculty trained in emerging areas. Or when a university administration calls for proposals for innovation in curriculum or other areas, connected departments are usually at the ready to compete for resources, often in partnership with other units. Not so with isolated departments or those suffering from paralyzing factionalism.

These are some of the necessary but insufficient conditions that mark departments as candidates for receivership. These characteristics are not wholly independent of one another, and of course, departments that display more of these traits probably are at greater risk of having leadership imposed upon them by administration. However, any observer of higher education will note that these characteristics are not unusual even in academically successful departments. As we have noted, receivership is rare. What, then, separates the departments that invite alien rule from those that do not?

### **Precipitating Conditions**

Departments at risk of receivership greatly increase that risk by capturing the attention of higher administration. They do so when the characteristics noted above move from being private matters to public ones. In actual instances of receivership, there is almost always a precipitating condition, or several.

There are a number of such conditions. A poorly managed tenure or promotion case often reveals to deans and provosts that the department is unable to do right by its members, particularly if it becomes clear that the fight over such a case owes more to internal departmental divisions than it does to the record of the professor under consideration.<sup>9</sup> This has a direct

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<sup>9</sup> Can alien rule of departments under receivership increase the legal vulnerability of institutions of higher education in negative tenure decisions? During Yale University Department of Philosophy's period of receivership, junior faculty member Susan Neiman was denied tenure. She brought a lawsuit for breach of contract against Yale University based on the theory of unqualified evaluators. Under conditions of receivership, she argued, her case for promotion was entrusted to "a group of scholars who were not trained in her field and did not understand her work." For more on this subject, see Allen's *Lingua Franca* article, 52 and 58; and Ann H. Franke and Lawrence White, "Responsibilities of Department Chairs: Legal Issues," 11. Prepared for "Collaboration Toward the Common Good: Faculty and Administrators Working Together," a conference sponsored by the American Association of University Professors and the American

cause in the greater confusion over identity and separation from institutional norms characteristic of departments ripe for receivership that, in turn, increase the likelihood that the faculty will simply be unable to come to a consensus about the merits of an individual's case.

A similar logic applies with respect to hiring, and especially at the senior level. It is exceedingly difficult to recruit stars to a department known for its internal strife. Senior-level professors will have better alternatives. Should candidates choose to go through the search process, they are often in a position to share with deans their perspectives on a department, and why they choose not to accept an offer. This contributes to public awareness and administrative knowledge of issues formerly contained within the department. Departments at risk, therefore, typically are unable to hire their first or second choices at any level, but especially the senior level.

To illustrate: Columbia University's Department of English reportedly was one of the bloodiest battlegrounds in the annals of departmental dysfunction.<sup>10</sup> So polarized were faculty searches at ground zero in the culture wars that in 2002 only 37 of 46 tenure line faculty positions were filled. To break the ideological log-jam, responsibility for faculty searches were turned over to five professors of English from peer institutions – an unusual approach to bridging the gap between native and alien rule in a department that effectively had been placed into receivership for the most significant decisions about its intellectual future.

Likewise, junior faculty with choices hesitate to accept appointments at a place where their colleagues simply cannot agree on what is important. Paired with evidence that existing junior faculty are poorly treated, the administration may consider themselves provoked into a stance, as at Notre Dame. After a series of searches for new junior faculty at Notre Dame were derailed by factional conflict between adherents of mainstream and alternative approaches to economics, the future of the Department of Economics became the focus of the university's academic council meetings.<sup>11</sup>

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Conference of Academic Deans, Washington, D.C., October 26-28, 2000. Revised by the authors in July 2002. Available at the American Council on Education Department Leadership Project <<http://www.acenet.edu/resources/chairs>>.

<sup>10</sup> *Critical Mass* (March 17, 2002).

<sup>11</sup> <[Provost.nd.edu/resources/ac\\_minutes/documents/3-20-03.pdf](http://Provost.nd.edu/resources/ac_minutes/documents/3-20-03.pdf)>.

Regime change, whether in the form of splitting the department into two separate units, or placing the existing one into receivership, was regarded as the surest way to send a strong signal to the outside world that the institution would take appropriate measures to protect the careers of junior faculty, thus increasing the likelihood of recruiting the best and brightest in the field.

Failure to recruit over several seasons not only leads to squandered opportunities for new resources, but certainly captures the attention of a competent dean. A sure sign of a departmental power struggle is when multiple factions protest to the dean about procedural irregularities that undermine the legitimacy of the search process. Healthy units can usually agree on terms that allow them to hire, even if they do not always have consensus about which is the best candidate.

There are other precipitating conditions that attract negative attention to the internal workings of a department. Plummeting national ratings are a sure red flag. Consider the condition which brought the decade-long internal dissent in Yale's Philosophy Department to a head. A damning report released in September 1995 by the National Research Council "showed that Yale's doctoral program in philosophy had plummeted from 18<sup>th</sup> place in 1982 to 59<sup>th</sup> (tied with Michigan State) in 1992."<sup>12</sup> Efforts to reverse this decline and "put the department back together" were launched in earnest after several years of receivership, beginning with the appointment of a distinguished philosopher and capable administrator from UCLA. Yet these efforts clearly were complicated by uncertainties of disciplinary definition, as the boundaries of philosophy reached beyond the canon to touch on a wide range of fields, from "psychoanalytic theory and medical ethics to computer science and international affairs," while tactical uncertainties remained about how best to rebuild the faculty, according to a report in the *Yale Alumni Magazine*.

Yet another precipitating condition can be an escalating conflict between a chair and a dean. Partisans of quantitative and qualitative approaches to Political Science at NYU, who had coexisted but "had never gotten along

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<sup>12</sup> Jon Zonderman, "Rethinking Philosophy: After a Painful Period of Internal Struggle, a Flagship Department is Still Struggling to Rebuild," *Yale Alumni Magazine* (November 1995), <[http://www.yalealumnimagazine.com/issues/95\\_11/philosophy.html](http://www.yalealumnimagazine.com/issues/95_11/philosophy.html)>.

well” as a result of the differing value each camp assigned to the other’s work, ended up in conflict with their dean over a proposed senior hire whose qualitative approach ended the era of departmental detente.<sup>13</sup> When a senior faculty member from the quantitative faction expressed concern to the dean, with whom he reportedly was close, and the dean intervened to show his displeasure with the proposed hire, relations with the sitting department chair deteriorated rapidly. Escalating conflict between the chair and dean led the department directly into receivership, which allowed the dean to rebuild the department in accordance with his preferences: namely, along quantitative lines

Scandal – unaddressed sexual harassment, excessive or improper consulting or textbook-kickback schemes – which engage numerous offices of the university in investigative activity also can bring a department into the limelight. Another is an on-going financial deficit, a sign that the unit leader is unable to control spending, and may be trying to buy peace from a restive faculty. All of these conditions raise the visibility of the department in negative ways and increase its vulnerability to receivership, particularly if the department chair is implicated in the problems directly, or regarded as an ineffective manager.

One less obvious precipitating condition is student activism. When students are affected by internal strife, they are sometimes able to express their displeasure collectively. In itself, student activism around academic issues is quite rare, and inspires scrutiny. Students are far more unfettered by fear of their individual fate should they protest than are faculty, which makes student collective action considerably more threatening to a department. Students – for whom the complicated academic hierarchy and university organization chart can be impenetrable – often choose to go directly to the president, and sometimes the governing board, bypassing chairs, deans, and provosts. At the University of Washington, for instance, students in the American Ethnic Studies department became deeply involved in the divisive battles of the faculty around core academic and governance issues. They engaged in protest focused, at least initially, on a disputed tenure case. By all accounts, their vocal and persistent activism, directed at the president of the university, is widely regarded as the key precipitating condition for the department’s eventual receivership.

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<sup>13</sup> “How Cult Internet Character Mr. Perestroika Divided NYU’s Political Science Department,” *New York Observer* (December 11, 2004), <<http://www.observer.com/pages/story.asp?ID=5296>>.

Instant public exposure ensues from this sort of student activism, and a president's inquiry to the relevant dean can inspire new plans for action or departmental leadership in the future. The demand for a plan of action can bring tensions to a head. What constitutes a plan of action? The president might want to know how the students' concerns will be met which almost certainly assures external scrutiny. The dean will want to know how a unit in the College has come to such a point and how it intends to right itself. Yet the very conditions which brought forth the student activism are those that make the likelihood of a measured and workable departmental response highly unlikely. Instead, the demand by a central administrator is more likely to lead to a highly defensive response than a proactive one. Isolated and contentious departments can become more entrenched in their battles – and now have a new battle to wage, as well – rather than provoked into positive change.

In this kind of situation, the departmental leader's capacity and suitability for leadership is called into question. What is the chair to say to the dean who asks why the department is unable to hire or promote, spend resources appropriately, or respond to student demands. The kind of implicit agreement which exists between a dean and departmental chair that departments should be permitted, on the whole, to manage their own affairs according to the standards set by their faculty, is called into question. Indeed, the strongly-held norm of self-governance may be revealed to be entirely dependent on a minimum level of accommodation to central directives as well as basic leadership competence. As we will discuss below, the standard methods for selecting departmental leadership, which rely on a high degree of consensus between academic administration and department faculty, essentially conspires against choosing strong leaders. For departments in distress, this increases the probability of alien rule under conditions of receivership.

### **Departmental Reactions**

Just as the imposition of alien rule can coalesce nationalist sentiment, even among political actors with diverse allegiances and previously untapped bases for group solidarity, the imposition of alien rule in the context of academic receivership has its parallels institutionally. Faculty generally are opposed to and offended by the appointment of an outsider to head their

unit, leading to a suppression of internal disagreements in response to an external threat to their autonomy. The news of such an appointment is rightly regarded as a signal of upper administrators' dissatisfaction with unit performance or operations. Alien rulers are generally regarded as more accountable to the administrators who chose them than to the faculty they serve. Furthermore, as outsiders their ability to understand local norms is suspect from the outset, not being "native speakers" of the language of the discipline.

Interviews conducted for this study suggest that even when there are many bases for mutual understanding, faculties under receivership actively participate in constructing imposed leaders as aliens by minimizing similarities and exaggerating perceived differences along disciplinary, ideological, methodological or other lines. No basis for identification between the alien ruler and the faculty is so solid that it cannot be deconstructed to constitute a meaningful difference, under conditions of imposed governance. While the alien rulers may have taken up the leadership challenge out of an intellectual affinity for or long-standing political loyalty to the unit in receivership, having previously served as adjunct faculty, worked closely with core faculty, or served on relevant committees, they typically receive a chilly greeting or worse: find themselves the objects of abject hostility. How they manage that response is one of the most significant tests of their actual leadership abilities. Even the most competent leaders pay a high emotional price as their efforts to "save" the unit are continually interpreted through the lenses of personal ambition, incompatible values, or mistrusted motives.

For their part, faculties under receivership are legitimately distressed by the vote of no confidence in their internal capacity to generate leadership or guide their own affairs, since under ordinary conditions of shared governance units are encouraged to identify leaders from among their own ranks and manage a variety of decisions, large and small. Serious conflict between the unit and the administration raise genuine threats to autonomy and access to resources. For under these circumstances, departments can win the battle by securing an internal administrator, but lose the war, by lacking sufficient administrative confidence to secure future resources. Or they may sacrifice autonomy by accepting an alien ruler in whom the administration has high confidence, winning resources for the unit but potentially sacrificing control over locally held values that diverge from the

institutional agenda. In either case, the move into receivership is fraught with tension because it violates normative expectations within institutions of higher education of shared governance, disciplinary leadership, and departmental autonomy.

### **The Importance of Disciplinarity**

Disciplinary credentials are universally regarded as a key qualification for leadership of academic departments. In some cases, outstanding scholars of the discipline are chosen as highly visible leaders, particularly when there is a drive to raise the department's profile and reputation nationally. In other cases, the position of department chair is a low status service obligation, rotated among senior members of the faculty, requiring no special scholarly or leadership credentials other than disciplinary affiliation and widespread acceptability. A 1975 survey of department chairs at Miami University revealed one nearly universal quality of leadership there. "Chairmen overwhelmingly (83 percent) view themselves as faculty members, not as administrators. They are discipline-oriented scholar-teachers whose interests and loyalties lie with their fields, faculty colleagues, and students."<sup>14</sup> Of course chairs' sense of identity may vary at different types of higher education institutions. Nevertheless, a central aspect of this inquiry concerns the actual skills that disciplinary experience and identity bring to the work of leading academic departments.

So ubiquitous is the expectation of disciplinary credentials for departmental leadership that little critical thought has been given to what they actually bring to the task at hand. However, if the concept of alien rule is to have any meaning, surely it is defined in contrast to accepted notions of "native rule" exercised by widely acceptable departmental insiders. Resistance to alien rule is at least in part based on the notion that chairs drawn from other disciplines are not intellectually or culturally competent to lead units outside of their discipline. This conventional wisdom, examined critically, raises the broader question of which powers and responsibilities of department chairs depend on disciplinary expertise and what constitute the universal competencies of departmental administration and leadership? Or, put another way, why is there such a limited market for academic administration

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<sup>14</sup> Herbert Waltzer, "The Job of the Academic Department Chairman: Experience and Recommendations from Miami University," An ACE Occasional Paper (Washington, DC: American Council on Education, 1975), 11.

at the departmental level and why is it so clearly segmented by disciplinary expertise?

Richard Edwards has argued that “the department, and in particular its leader, the department chair, gets assigned very demanding and complicated organizational responsibilities, most of which are completely independent of the department's disciplinary basis.”<sup>15</sup> Similarly, Gmelch and Miskin have written that “the time of ‘amateur administration’ where professors temporarily step into the administrative role of department chair has lost its effectiveness.”<sup>16</sup> To assess their claims, it is worth reviewing the major responsibilities and prerogatives of department chairs.<sup>17</sup> Perhaps the best point of reference on this topic is the American Council on Education's Online Center, which hosts the most comprehensive collection of resources about the roles and responsibilities of department chairs.<sup>18</sup> Surveys of department chairs have identified several distinctive but common roles including administrative, leadership, interpersonal, and resource development.<sup>19</sup> Only a few of these roles – specifically related to faculty recruitment, mentoring, and evaluation — might legitimately be regarded as dependent on disciplinary knowledge. The vast majority of chair roles, including fiscal oversight, scheduling coordination, staff supervision, mediation, advocacy, and warrior-entrepreneur in the battle for resources, require more general administrative capabilities.

Some would argue further that recent developments within higher education have reduced the ceremonial value of “prestigious scholars within the discipline” as department chairs, and placed new emphasis on the administrative skills needed to effectively manage the consequences of “budget cuts, declining enrollments, productivity reports, accountability

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<sup>15</sup> Edwards, “The Academic Department,” 18.

<sup>16</sup> Walter H. Gmelch and Val D. Miskin, “Understanding the Challenges of Department Chairs,” *Leadership Skills for Departmental Chairs* (Boston: Anker, 1993), 3-18.

<sup>17</sup> Gmelch and Miskin (1993) provide a systematic review of the literature on the duties of departmental chairs.

<sup>18</sup> American Council on Education <ace\_departmentchairs@acenet.edu>.

<sup>19</sup> Steven Graham and Pam Benoit, “Constructing the Role of Department Chair,” ACE Department Chair Online Resource Center (2004).



measures, fund raising, or changing technology.”<sup>20</sup> If disciplinary expertise constitutes a declining proportion of department chairs’ actual responsibilities, it nevertheless assumes enormous symbolic importance to faculty who count on their chair to represent their interests and values to central administration. There can be little doubt that department chairs are the quintessential middle managers who have dual responsibilities to present administrative mandates and priorities to faculty, while serving as the faculty’s “primary spokesperson and advocate.” Yet as Hecht et al aptly noted, “Some faculty may even be outraged to think of their chair as an agent of the administration.” Nowhere is this faculty perception more acute or their outrage more vocal than in cases when academic administrators appoint outside chairs to head departments in receivership.

Based on the evidence, one must conclude that disciplinary expertise on the part of their leadership matters more to departmental faculty than it actually should when the requisite skills are considered objectively. This disjuncture hints at the symbolic value of disciplinary credentials for departmental leadership within higher educational institutions, since they appear to trump actual leadership ability in chair appointments. This raises the deeper question of how and why disciplinary expertise matters to faculty. Or, framed in the context of the larger conference topic, *Alien Rule and its Discontents*, why is native leadership preferred over alien rule even when the actual benefits do not seem to follow rationally?

## **The Selection of Department Chairs**

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<sup>20</sup> Irene W. D. Hecht, Mary Lou Higgerson, Walter H. Gmelch, and Allan Tucker, “Roles and Responsibilities of Department Chairs,” *The Department Chair as Academic Leader* (Phoenix, Arizona: ACE Oryx Press, 1999), Chapter 2. Rising demands for administrative and managerial skill in the office of the department chair, particularly due to a decentralization of functions, also is addressed by Robert Kelly, “Dealing with Administrative Mandates,” *Academic Leader* 20:12 (December 2004).

The process of choosing a department chair varies by institution.<sup>21</sup> In some places, particularly where a rotational model exists, there may be a shared understanding of whose turn is next, or the new chair may be selected by a vote of the faculty. In other places, chair search committees accept nominations and screen prospective candidates for a provost or dean, who has exclusive responsibility for final selection. Certainly there are many variations on these themes. But whatever the approach, few would argue that the ideal outcomes occur when a reasonable degree of consensus has been achieved between faculty and administration about the preferred leader.

Outside of schools of medicine where chair appointments are indefinite, a general observation is that academic departments tend to select relatively weak leaders. Why should this be the case? One possibility is that weak chairs provide a higher level of comfort and certainty. Individual members of the department may believe that, if need be, they can assert their superior academic qualifications to overcome any possible initiative by a chair that does not serve their interests. Another possibility is that weak chairs appear to ensure collective governance. If an individual is not strong enough to lead, their next best option is to promote collective leadership; these two are often posed in opposition. Thus, not only does the appointment of an alien chair contravene the practice of choosing a member of the tribe, it also goes against the grain of choosing weak leadership.

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<sup>21</sup> Means of chair selection are outlined by Irene W.D. Hecht, "Appointment and Compensation: A Theme with Variations," unpublished manuscript available through the ACE Department Chair Online Resource Center (2002). For a thorough discussion of considerations that should go into the choice of a department chair, see William J. Ehmann, "Advice on Anointing: Some Faculty Considerations on Choosing a New Chair," an unpublished manuscript available through the ACE Department Chair Online Resource Center. "Is your department truly ready for change?" Ehmann inquires provocatively. He is remarkably enthusiastic about the potential benefits of faculty selecting "a colleague from a closely related department or even an outside chair." His list of signs that faculty should consider an outside chair closely correspond to our own list of departmental receivership characteristics. "Some indications of your collective readiness might be found in how your department reacted to the most recent external review, whether there is any history of failed searches despite adequate applicant pools, or how willing the group would be to giving second changes to faculty who have been less involved in the department (should the new chair reach out to them). Candid discussions with the dean also may indicate how your department is perceived beyond your building, and what he or she may be looking for in a new chair." Unfortunately, nowhere else in the literature have we seen any indication that faculty share Ehmann's fondness for alien rulers, and it probably would be safe to conclude that they are usually selected by administrative fiat rather than through faculty deliberations about their leadership preference.

There are two parts to the role of most department chairs from the point of view of departmental faculty. The first is to compete favorably for institutional resources. The second is to mete out individual rewards. The first favors stronger leadership and advantages alien rulers; the second favors weaker leadership, and advantages the selection of native rulers. In institutions where there are few resources to go after – or where there is the perception of few additional resources up for grabs – there is no particular call to select a strong chair who can align the priorities of the institution with the values of the department. Given that almost all faculty members have a continuous preoccupation with their own salaries, teaching loads, and other characteristics of their own employment situations, and that in most academic workplaces faculty negotiate individually rather than collectively over their specific working conditions, there tend to be more immediate reasons and personal benefits that attend faculty preferences for weak leaders.

A more analytic view of the role of chairs suggests that there are two major responsibilities: governance and administration. The special nature of governance in the academy means that chairs are responsible for ensuring that collective governance is preserved on all important matters. Yet there are also a set of skills in administration for which there is precious little preparation in institutions of higher education. It is largely presumed that achievements and developmental abilities acquired coming up through the ranks as faculty members or personal traits constitute adequate preparation for leadership at the departmental level. What are the matches and mismatches in skill, personal characteristics requisite for success, and perspective in these transitions from faculty to chair, chair to dean, etc.? How might formal training enhance skills and reshape perspective(s) to meet the predictable demands of these positions? What are the generic competencies of these positions that require training over and above disciplinary and faculty skills? From many corners of academe, there are growing calls for leadership training to prepare department chairs for the myriad demands of the position.<sup>22</sup>

### **Preference for Native Rule**

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<sup>22</sup> See, for example, “Department Chairs Call for Leadership Training: Universities Should Bolster Their Guidance of Chairs, Faculty Say.” *APA Monitor Online* 30:8 (September 1999).

Thus, a preference for native rule might reflect more than concerns with comfort or familiarity, but might also speak to a preference for weaker leaders within the context of faculty participation in shared governance. The preferred unit leaders are more beholden to their faculty since there are many more opportunities for self-policing within the context of common disciplinary membership. The tendency of disciplinary leaders to maintain local customs contributes greatly to explaining the difficulty of aligning academic departments with wider institutional priorities. Thus disciplinary leadership fosters departmental autonomy, even at some expense to a department's access to institutional resources.

If these comprise some of the costs and benefits of disciplinary leadership at the departmental level, they pose some interesting problems as academic institutions have attempted, in recent years, to reposition themselves to foster interdisciplinary connections in the interest of liberating intellectual energy to solve problems that cross the disciplines. Departments and their preferred leaders may be among the most significant sources of resistance to the kinds of intellectual mobility that lies at the core of interdisciplinary initiatives. Inversely, the appointment of alien leaders may be one of the neglected hinge pins of institutional transformation, not only for troubled departments but for those that have successfully policed their boundaries by virtue of disciplinary vigor, effective functioning, perceived health and academic quality. Alien rule appears to have greater power than disciplinary leadership to bring critical questioning to local norms and increased potential to align departments with the objectives of the wider institution. Leaders who can reach beyond a narrow departmental and disciplinary focus can foster interdisciplinary collaboration. In many ways, alien rulers embody the news that "insularity is no longer acceptable" collective behavior at the departmental level.<sup>23</sup> Their placement in units isolated by destructive territorial behavior models the idea that intellectual vigor and productivity depend on achieving higher levels of institutional connectivity. The question remains whether alien rule ought to be limited to units that blatantly exhibit signs of dysfunction or whether it might be adopted as a proactive strategy for institutional transformation?

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<sup>23</sup> Irene W.D. Hecht, Mary Lou Higgerson, Walter H. Gmelch, Allan Tucker, "The Chair and External Audiences," in *The Department Chair as Academic Leader* (Phoenix, Arizona: ACE Oryx Press, 1999), Chapter 14.

In a 1999 article in the higher education journal *Change*, Richard Edwards raised the broader question of how the academic department fits into the university reform agenda.<sup>24</sup> Edwards astutely observed the disjuncture between institutional reform and unchanged departmental culture.

No plans, no hopes, no change agenda for departments has emerged out of the larger reform movement. Yet the department is arguably the definitive locus of faculty culture, especially departments that gain their definition by being their campus's embodiment of distinguished and hallowed disciplines. We can note the repeated calls for universities to place more weight on teaching performance in their promotion and tenure decisions; yet the crucial locus of such decisions lies within the department, and the crucial variable is departmental culture.

Is it desirable, or even possible, for reform to be successful if it operates at the institutional and individual levels but leaves the intervening levels unchanged?

Douglas J. Murray has argued that department chairs have a critical place in the process of institutional transformation. In his view, the time has come to redefine their roles, to make department chairs “as responsible for the college or university as they are for their departments.”<sup>25</sup> Furthermore, “they must lead the effort to change the existing mindset that focuses inward rather than outward.”

### **Selection of Alien Rulers**

The qualities that make a person a promising candidate for alien ruler are closely related to the conditions that precipitate departmental receivership. Deans and provosts concerned with the lack of internal leadership, a mismatch between unit values and academic standards held at higher levels, or seeking more effective conflict management, often recruit alien rulers with demonstrated leadership experience or recognizable signs of leadership potential and high scholarly credentials, normed to college/university promotion and tenure standards. To gain some measure

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<sup>24</sup> Edwards, “The Academic Department,” 18.

<sup>25</sup> Douglas J. Murray, “Leading University-Wide Change: Defining New Roles for the Department Chair,” *The Department Chair* (Summer 2000).

of acceptance, it is often helpful if the person has some connection with the department going into receivership (e.g., appointment as an adjunct member of the faculty) and previous participation in unit planning or governance, though some distance is needed from the problems that led the unit into receivership. In some cases, this administrative appointment may also resolve, at least temporarily, a problematic misfit between a valued individual (with leadership potential) and his or her disciplinary home. Thus a “foreign assignment” might be a good idea until conditions become more hospitable in the person’s actual home department.

### **Willingness to Serve**

There can be a number of compelling reasons why a department is ripe for receivership from the dean’s or provost’s point of view, but how do they ever get anyone to take the job? The norms about self-governance in the academy are well-known, and so, by taking such a position, the occupant is nearly guaranteed some degree of ostracism from the faculty they govern.

While it is possible to find some writing on the conditions that drive departments into receivership, almost nothing has been written about what would motivate a senior faculty member with high scholarly credentials to accept the obviously difficult assignment of leading a department in receivership. Our interviews with those who had accepted these appointments hinted at some possible reasons, including frustrated leadership potential, a sense of unhappiness or marginalization within their departmental home, and sense of “otherness” along multiple dimensions that contributes to a sense of alienation within the institution.

The frequency with which we encountered alien rulers with marginal social identities (e.g, gay and lesbian people, women of color, or some combination) led us to speculate that those who know that they will encounter discrimination in their quest for more desirable leadership positions may be more open to difficult assignments for several reasons: people with marginal social identities are required to (repeatedly) demonstrate their leadership competencies on the way to higher positions; they are likely to have developed a fortitude that serves them in hostile environments; and sometimes, ironically, they experience greater freedom to “be themselves” at some distance from “home.”

In fact, the very same characteristics that make some individuals attractive to a dean as alien rulers are also those that increase the probability that they will accept such positions. Marginal social identities at the personal and professional levels mean that there are few, if any, places in the academy where these individuals are members of a normative status quo or experience a complete sense of belonging. One implication of this is that there are fewer leadership opportunities for this pool than for others with similar (or fewer) talents, even as those very same characteristics may lead to a set of skills and predispositions *especially* conducive to excellent leadership (e.g., creative problem solving, fortitude). If these individuals with a set of leadership skills and blocked opportunities are to advance, their pathways will not be ordinary ones.

Still, to accept a position as an alien ruler has considerable risk associated with it, the risk of adding an unpopular portfolio to an already marginalized set of personal and professional characteristics. Why then do they do it?

Two answers are the twin incentives of money and opportunity. To compensate individuals for the well-known risks involved, deans are likely to offer salary and perquisites well beyond the average for departmental chairs, being willing to contort the salary scale in order to do so. Still, this might not be sufficient if there were a more conventional alternative opportunity. However, as we have argued, there usually is not. When comfortable desk jobs are filled by more privileged individuals, advancement through the ranks requires a willingness to accept combat assignments.<sup>26</sup>

Deans may also play hardball. Knowing that a person with leadership talent may be particularly interested in chairing the department of their own discipline, the dean may use the receivership position as a prerequisite for that plum job. One of our interviewees confirmed this conjecture: although

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<sup>26</sup> Women faculty in the STEM disciplines such as engineering, for example, report interest in leadership positions such as department chairs, but “felt that nobody was thinking of them in that way.” According to Judy Vance, a participant in the year 2000 NSF-sponsored Women Engineering Leadership Conference, women entering academic administration “are more likely to jump from full professor to assistant or associate dean without ever being a chair, thus missing a crucial step and ‘knocking down’ chances for further job opportunities or promotion to dean.” Barbara Mathias-Riegel, “A Chair in Your Future,” *ASEE Prism* 13:9 (Summer 2004). These observations lend credence to our observation that untapped leadership potential among women, racial and sexual minorities, and discrimination against them in selection for leadership positions within their home departments, may explain their overrepresentation in less desirable, but considerably more challenging, administrative assignments as alien rulers.

she was generally perceived to be in line for the chair of her disciplinary department, the dean told her explicitly that he would not consider her unless she took on the receivership chair. In another case, the individual wished to be considered for higher positions in administration, and since the chair position of her own department was not available to her because of the nature of her work, this provided the only option for earning the necessary stripes and experience. The fact that our small study encountered three out of three individuals with marginal social identities may suggest that alien rulers accept such assignments to overcome discrimination against women, gay and lesbian people, and people of color, in administrative advancement within the university.

While they may play hardball in securing the leadership needed to turn around dysfunctional departments, deans are also motivated to help their preferred chair succeed. Remember that the motivation for receivership is to get the department back into a quiescent and functioning phase. In this way, the candidate is also in a position to argue for resources that would be much less likely to be forthcoming in a chair negotiation, such as multiple positions and the power to fill them. Indeed, the alien rulers we interviewed made it clear that their decision to take the position was contingent on a negotiation with the appointing dean that brought new resources into the department, often in the form of authorization for a series of critical hires, discretionary funds, assistance in resolving difficult personnel problems, or access to other resources necessary for success. These sorts of dowries make alien rulers significantly more powerful than the preferred internal candidates of units at odds with upper administration, and set the stage for the internal politics of alien rule, which trade departmental autonomy for access to institutional resources, and which condition opportunities for development on greater conformity to wider institutional norms related to academic quality, productivity, or civility.

There are altruistic motivations for accepting the leadership of a department in receivership, as well. Alien chairs usually have a history with the department they come to lead, care about its health and future, and may see themselves as the only hope for that department. They believe that they can do the job, which means ultimately returning the department to leadership by one of its own. They may also believe that they can win the hearts and minds of those they serve: that is, move from alien to native status.



Finally, as one of our interviewees noted: “The department was far enough from my field that no matter how badly it went, it wouldn’t damage me professionally.” In this sense, the course of alien rule is a relatively safe testing ground for leadership since it lies at some professional distance from the chair’s disciplinary home and comes with built-in explanations for failure, should the experience prove to be unsuccessful.

Ironically, the improved prospects for mobility that attend successful runs as alien rulers tend to reinforce the judgments of the most skeptical faculty in units that have experienced receivership. The departure of the alien ruler for a new and higher administrative position only confirms what they suspected all along: that he or she took the position as a launching pad for personal ambitions, with no long-term commitment to the units they led. That the alien ruler improved what he or she found is of little consequence when the master narrative is about the return of the department to rightful self-governance.

Of course, from the point of view of the alien ruler, the level of hostility encountered daily from the faculty of a department in receivership may serve to reinforce the perception that the grass is greener at the helm of one’s own discipline, where at least there is some basis for social acceptance and group solidarity. Alternatively, the experience of sharp separation between faculty and administrative perceptions — that characterizes alien rule to a greater extent than native rule — may constitute significant preparation for an upper administrative position, where loyalty to a particular discipline has a diminished place in decision-making and faculty interests are only one of many considerations.

## **Conclusion**

There are intriguing parallels between the pride of place given to disciplinary expertise and its contribution to a rich and diverse intellectual environment in universities, on the one hand, and the celebration of strong ethnic and national identities in nation-states on the other. Their respective contributions to institutional and social order – and the instances in which order breaks down – also make for compelling comparisons. In particular, when those identities threaten the larger goals of the organization, institution, or nation, we can more fully appreciate deeply embedded

institutional or governance norms. Additionally, although academic receivership may be seen as a specific case of the breakdown of social control, it is little different than similar instances that compromise any social order.

The normative practice of selecting chairs from among disciplinary disciples appears to be as firmly embedded as ever. We find no inkling of an emerging market for chairs independent of discipline. Still, there is some reason to believe that there might be a slow erosion of the one-to-one correspondence between discipline of chair and department owing to two forces. The first is the growing importance of interdisciplinarity in most major universities. The second is the growing demand for accountability for universities in general, which places more administrative, as against governance, responsibility on chairs.

The academic and organizational complexity of universities leads to multiple sources of domination of the collective over the individual. It is clear that alien chairs are considered akin to colonial rulers. Yet, as we have indicated, democratic governance in departments can also lead to something akin to tyranny of the majority, even when the majority does not represent the highest ideals of academic freedom and quality. Disputes over theoretical and methodological principles and approaches can turn from rich intellectual fare to incivility, poor treatment of junior faculty and graduate students, and ineffective decision-making. In those instances, academic receivership may serve as protection for academic ideals and those who practice them.

That there are individuals in the academy with scholarly credentials and administrative ambitions ready to take on alien rule results, at least in part, from continuing, subtle discrimination against those who are socially and professionally marginalized. This serves as a subtle counterpoint to the apparent inclusiveness of “choosing one’s own”. One’s own turns out to be a constricted set, not entirely defined by discipline.

Finally, it may be instructive to note that the alien chairs whom we interviewed were able to claim some measure of success. Turning points in climate, tenure cases, hiring and curricular development, however, diminished faculty distrust and in each case brought hard-won respect to the chair. Incremental progress toward a healthier departmental climate

typically was reinforced by the release of new resources, approval of new degree programs, or an improved relationship with university administration.<sup>27</sup> While the alien rulers we interviewed never gained acceptance as natives, they often secured a reasonable level of trust and respect from a significant portion of the faculty, even those who had initially made their lives a living hell. Sources of satisfaction included these small personal victories, marked progress in terms of the substantial issues within the department, and a well-deserved reputation for leadership under difficult conditions. Improved social capital within the university, and improved prospects for obtaining plum leadership positions within the wider institution rarely were mentioned directly by alien rulers, but our observations about their career trajectories suggest that substantial professional rewards can accrue to them after a successful term of office.

We are particularly interested in the implications of this work for the transformation of the academy. This study comprises part of a larger work that offers a critique of existing structures in universities that have – among other things – excluded from leadership individuals with social characteristics and intellectual predilections who joined the academy after the rules and norms of governance were established. Our paper attempts to reveal not only the formal politics of governance in the everyday life of an institution of higher education, and to chronicle the protestations of those who perceive that they are governed without consent, but the motivation to rule and the standards by which leadership is judged. Alien rule in the academy lays bare latent criteria for leadership, and so opens the possibility for fresh analysis.

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<sup>27</sup> Columbia University has begun to trumpet the turn-around story of the Department of English and Comparative Literature. See Margaret Hunt Gram, “After Civil War, New Life for English Dept.” *Columbia Spectator Online Edition* (May 9, 2005).