So you want to be a chair?
a collaborative conversation about the tough moments

Laura Roberts, MD, MA
September 2020
1. Reflecting on the nature of the job
2. Tough moments
3. Sustaining yourself as a leader
1. Reflecting on the nature of the job as chair

- Academic medicine as entrusted with the responsibility of creating a better future

- Clinical departments and their divisions as entrusted with “five plus one” academic missions
  - Advancing science
  - Multidisciplinary educational excellence
  - Clinical innovation and service
  - Community Engagement and Commitment
  - Leadership, Inclusion, and Professionalism
  - + Administrative and financial excellence
1. Reflecting on the nature of job

- Annual performance criteria for chairs/chiefs
  - Overall success of the department
  - Financial success of the department
  - Overall
  - Clinical
- Success in garnering NIH research support
- Success in program development
- Caliber of faculty and success in recruitment
- Success in cross-departmental projects
- Success in garnering philanthropic support
- Success in all aspects of good citizenship

Different aspects of the role will have different weight, depending on the institution, context
multiple overlapping professional roles of the academic chair/chief

- Physician
- Scholar
- Educator
- Administrator
- Senior faculty member and mentor
- Departmental leader
- Institutional leader
- National academic leader
- Societal opinion leader
the good news, and the bad...

Each of these roles carries considerable responsibilities
• Often with significant real-time impact on others
• Often with multiple stakeholders, both vertical and horizontal
• Often dependent on the qualities of the individual leader as well as the full leadership team
• Often involving decisions with poor information, insufficient analyses, and incomplete influence on outcomes
• Often involving repercussions for the future
• Often with commitments and values in tension or in conflict
You do a lot of things
You do a lot of things you may not want to do
You do a lot of things that others cannot do for you
You do a lot of things where you rely on others
You do a lot of things where you must be prepared
You do a lot of things where your trustworthiness and integrity are key

You don’t have much free time
You are never really “off the clock” or “off the hook”

More good and bad news...

About 68 hours/week in face to face “contact” activities, a lot of evenings
About 16 hours/week in preparation
Half of the effort spent in non-departmental institutional and national activities
Imagined job

Faculty – development, hiring, recruitment, retention, promotion

Finances – revenue growth, negotiations, budget….

Leadership - strategic vision, values, communications…. 

Program oversight - research, education, clinical growth, partnerships…. 

Etc, etc, etc…
Imagined job

Actual job
Imagined job

- Department
- School & System
- Other academic, regional, etc
- National

Actual job
Traditional academic pathway to chair role

• Achievement as a physician-scientist or as a residency program director, and related national recognition
• Early mentorship for learning academic skills
• Early opportunities for carrying responsibility
• Attainment of milestones and movement across institutions

Emerging pathways to becoming chair

• Highly valued internal faculty member who becomes essential
• Uniquely qualified internal or external candidate who fills a specific need at a specific time in the history of a department
Necessary preconditions:

- Accomplishment and credibility in at least two (and preferably and sometimes necessarily all five) of the five mission domains
- Success in early leadership

Necessary skills:

- Strong organizational skills
- Strong communication skills
- Strong decision-making, negotiation skills
- Strong team-building skills
- Strong financial and administrative skills
- Strong self-care and self-observation skills
Necessary non-cognitive attributes:

- Future-oriented mindset
- Trustworthiness, respectfulness
- Dissatisfaction with current state
- Comfort with responsibility
- Capacity for perspective-taking
- Capacity for partnering
- Capacity for managing interpersonal boundaries
- Respect for resources
Necessary non-cognitive attributes:

- Comfort with discomfort
- Comfort with change
- Capacity for empathy
- Capacity for generativity
- Capacity for self-sacrifice
- Capacity for self-care
- Courage and tenacity
- Patience, and impatience
“There we are. What’s 350 pounds divided by two?”
"WE DON'T WANT YOU TO VIEW THIS AUDIT COMMITTEE AS BEING IN ANY WAY CONFRONTATIONAL"
“When I do good, I feel good. When I do bad, I feel bad. That's my religion.”

-Abraham Lincoln
PSYCHIATRIC CARE
5¢
1. Reflecting on the nature of the job
2. Tough moments
3. Sustaining yourself as a leader
Conversations with the dean or CEO or...
"Mind your own business! This is how I like it."
Just a few issues from the past week or so...

- “threats” to two significant programs
- “harmonizing the message” issue
- “perverse formula” reimbursement issue
- Year-end budget closure
- Strategy document
- A “routine” audit
- A political “alignment” problem
- New clinical metrics
- Repercussions of division chief selection
- Space/resource reallocation
- New compensation plan proposal
- Faculty recruitment
- Impaired/ill medical student concern
- Stacked book, journal, grant deadlines
- Vital faculty retention
- Fundraising tasks
- Annual evaluations of senior faculty and staff leaders
- New university requests
- Implementation of new academic affairs guidelines
- A “consensual relations” issue
- Positive tenure decision
- Plus, all the things I can’t say...
Just a few issues from the past week or so…*

“threats” to two significant programs  
website overhaul  
a “perverse formula” reimbursement issue
strategy document  
a “routine” audit  
a political “alignment” problem
new clinical metrics  
repercussions of division chief selection
space/resource reallocation  
new compensation plan proposal
faculty recruitment  
impaired/ill medical student concern
stacked book, journal, grant deadlines  
vital faculty retention
fundraising tasks  
annual evaluations of senior faculty and staff leaders
new university requests  
implementation of new academic affairs guidelines
a “consensual relations” issue  
plus, all the things I can’t say…

*what I have lost sleep over
Collaborative Conversation

What have the toughest moments been, so far, in your chair career?

What made these experiences so difficult?
Accurate information
Communication
Resources
Layers
Principles Time
Precedents
New or triangulated data
Consultation & external intervention
If you aren’t rich, you should always look useful.

Louis Ferdinand C`eline
1. Reflecting on the nature of the job
2. Tough moments
3. Sustaining yourself as a leader
3. Sustaining yourself as a leader
Approximately 158,000 faculty in academic medical schools in the US, a country of more than 328 million people.

Entrusted with transforming human health, entrusted with the future.

Academic medicine, and academic psychiatry in particular, has special responsibilities in our neighborhood and our world.

Who you are and the work you do truly matters.
Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has.

Margaret Mead
It is really, really important to take care of yourself
Purpose, joy, balance, and self-care

senior faculty member and mentor
physician
scholar
educator
administrator

departmental leader

institutional leader
national academic leader
societal opinion leader

life partner
parent
sibling
child
grandparent
friend
citizen
(whole) person
So you want to be a chair? 

a collaborative conversation about the tough moments

Laura Roberts, MD, MA
laura.roberts@stanford.edu