Academic Department Chair Ratings and Disciplinary Distinctions

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ABSTRACT

The primary purpose of this study was to examine differences in department head/chair ratings of importance of key administrative responsibilities by academic discipline (i.e., the Biglan model) as well as to explore departmental differences in faculty ratings of the head/chair's performance of those responsibilities by academic discipline. With the exception of two findings, no meaningful differences exist between disciplines in head/chair perceptions on the importance of key administrative responsibilities or faculty ratings of the head/chair's performance of those responsibilities. Taken together, first, these findings offer evidence for the generalizability of department chair ratings instruments. Second, the priorities expressed by department heads/chairs, and faculty ratings of those priorities, are fairly consistent across academic disciplines, which indicates that the priorities and experiences of academic heads/chairs are more similar than divergent.

Introduction

In response to apparent differences between academic departments, Biglan (1973a, 19873b) developed disciplinary distinctions among departments using multidimensional scaling. He found that departments at both research and liberal art universities could be classified on three dimensions: *structure, application,* and *life orientation* (see Table 1 below).

Table 1
Biglan's (1973a, 1973b) Departmental Dimensions

Biglan's Departmental Dimensions	
Structure: Body of theory agreeable to all members of field?	
Yes: "*Hard/Paradigmatic*"	No: "*Soft*"
Application: Does the field address applied, practical problems?	
Yes: "*Applied*"	No: "*Pure*"
Life Orientation: Does the field examine living organisms?	
Yes: "*Life-Oriented*"	No: "*Non-life*"

Much research has been conducted using Biglan's codings to examine disciplinary differences (e.g., Smart & Elton, 1982). In the current study, we coded departments by each of the Biglan categories: hard/paradigmatic or soft; pure or applied; and life-oriented or nonlife. We then examined whether head/chairs differed in their ratings of the importance of various administrative responsibilities. Next, we investigated whether faculty ratings of the head/chair's performance of those responsibilities also differed. Although much research has been conducted on the department chair's roles and responsibilities, few studies have examined how their importance and the head/chair's performance might vary across departments.

Method

Instrumentation and Data Sources

Archived data files were accessed from the IDEA Center's Feedback for Department Chair System (Hoyt, Bailey, & Gross, 1999). The IDEA Center (www.theideacenter.org) supports the evaluation and development of a number of research programs that focus on students, faculty, department chairs, deans and other higher education administrators. In the IDEA Chair System, head/chairs complete the *Chair Information Form* (CIF), and their corresponding faculty members respond to questions on the *Faculty Perceptions of Department Head/Chair Survey* (FPDHS). On the CIF, heads/chairs rate the *importance* of 20 administrative responsibilities, using a scale ranging from 1 = "*Not Important*" to 5 = "*Essential*." On the FPDHS, faculty rate their respective department head/chair's *performance* of the same 20 administrative responsibilities, using a scale from 1 = "*Poor*" to 5 = "*Outstanding*." Faculty data are aggregated for each department head/chair, and mean faculty ratings are computed on each item.

From 2003 to 2007, 19,083 faculty members were invited to rate their respective department head/chair using the FPDHS (Hoyt et al., 1999). Of those invited, 14,479 completed at least one item on the FPDHS (75.9% response rate). A total of 644 different department heads/chairs were rated. To obtain the final sample for this study, several exclusion criteria were enacted. First, if fewer than eight faculty members rated a specific department head/chair in a particular year, the department head/chair's entry was removed. Second, if there were multiple entries for a department head/chair across the years 2003 to 2007, only one of these entries was retained by random selection. Third, only cases where faculty members responded to at least 50% of the items on the FPDHS were retained. The final sample consisted of data from 474 different heads/chairs.

Procedure

Two coders independently categorized departments in the IDEA Chair Database by structure (hard/paradigmatic vs. soft), application (pure vs. applied), and life orientation (life-oriented vs. non-life). After the initial coding, ratings were of acceptable reliability (*Kappas* = .82, .79, and .86, respectively; percent agreement = 88.4%, 88.2%, and 89.0%). Disagreements were resolved by discussion.

Results

The vast majority (71%) of the department heads/chairs were appointed by a dean with consultation and approval of the faculty. Years of service varied, but the majority of the department head/chairs (63%) had served fewer than five years. The sample included 58% research universities, 33% master's level universities, and 9% associate/bachelors level institutions. The majority of the department heads/chairs (91%) had not been challenged in a grievance procedure or a lawsuit during the previous five years.

We conducted two 2 (*Structure*: Hard vs. Soft) x 2 (*Application*: Pure vs. Applied) x 2 (*Life Orientation*: Life-Oriented vs. Not) multivariate analyses of variance (MANOVAs) separately on the *chair ratings of importance* on three factor scales (research/faculty assessment, faculty enhancement, and departmental operations) and *faculty ratings of performance* on three factor scales (research/faculty assessment, faculty enhancement, and departmental operations). Alpha was set at .05. Furthermore, we made Bonferroni adjustments (α = .05/3 = .017) in conducting post-hoc univariate tests to control for Type I error inflation.

Head/Chair Ratings of Importance

With respect to head/chair ratings of importance, we observed a two-way Structure x Life-Orientation interaction for the composite variable, Wilks's $\lambda = .970$, $p < .004$, $\eta_p^2 = .03$. Univariate follow-ups revealed the significant interaction resided in the faculty enhancement scale, F (1,444) = 7.39, $p < .007$, $\eta_p^2 = .016$. Simple effects indicated a disordinal interaction. Within hard/paradigmatic departments, those with life-orientations (e.g., agronomy, entomology, botany, zoology) attributed greater importance to faculty enhancement ($M = 4.47$, $SD = 0.54$) than did those with nonlife-orientations (e.g., chemistry, geology, physics, math) ($M = 4.12$, $SD = 0.65$); this difference did not exist within "soft" departments. Thus, chairs from "hard" and life-oriented departments placed greater emphasis on such things as fostering faculty talents and interests, rejuvenating faculty vitality/enthusiasm, and developing collegiality.

A multivariate main effect for life orientation was also found, Wilks's $\lambda = .953$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .047$.

Results, cont.

Univariate follow-ups showed main effects for life orientation on research/faculty assessment, F (1,444) = 14.29, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .031$; and faculty enhancement, F (1,444) = 6.56, $p < .011$, $\eta_p^2 = .015$. Given the disordinal Structure x Life-Orientation interaction on faculty enhancement, interest in the main effect for this variable was diminished. However, the marginal means for research/faculty assessment indicated chairs from departments with a life-orientation ($M = 4.22$, $SD = 0.65$) had higher importance ratings than those with non-life orientations ($M = 3.93$, $SD = 0.80$). Thus, chairs from departments with life orientations placed greater importance on stimulating research/grants and contracts and guiding the development of sound procedures for assessing faculty performance.

Faculty Ratings of the Head/Chair Performance

We found multivariate main effects for faculty ratings of the head/chair's performance; however, no univariate follow-ups were statistically significant.

Conclusion

Two significant findings emerged from the current study. Within hard/paradigmatic departments, chairs from departments with life-orientations (e.g., agronomy, entomology, botany, zoology) attribute greater importance to faculty enhancement than do those with nonlife-orientations (e.g., chemistry, geology, physics, and math). This difference does not exist within soft departments. Second, chairs from departments with a life-orientation attribute greater importance to research/faculty assessment than do those with non-life orientations. These two findings support the importance of the role heads/chairs fulfill regarding faculty development. Nonetheless, given that there were no differences on faculty ratings of performances for their respective heads/chairs, just because a chair might emphasize a set of key responsibilities does not necessarily equate with greater performance of those responsibilities.

In sum, these findings offer evidence for the generalizability of department chair ratings instruments. Furthermore, the priorities expressed by department heads/chairs, and faculty ratings of those priorities, are fairly consistent across academic disciplines.

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