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# **PSC Report on Department Chairs:**

**A Study of Working  
Conditions and  
Recommendations  
for Support**



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# PSC Report on Department Chairs: A Study of Working Conditions and Recommendations for Support



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do more with less without considering the detrimental  
effects this has on faculty productivity and student success.*

CUNY Department Chair

## INTRODUCTION: WHY STUDY DEPARTMENT CHAIRS?

The Professional Staff Congress Department Chair Project was inspired by the conviction that a different City University of New York is possible. It is not too late to reverse the policies of economic austerity that have placed enormous pressure on CUNY's faculty, staff and students as a result of increasing enrollments, heightened dependence on part-time faculty and inadequate public funding, particularly since the financial crisis of 2007-08 and its resulting recession.

The PSC undertook the Department Chair Project to investigate and foreground the working conditions of academic department chairs at CUNY as a way to understand more deeply the educational environment that all members of the CUNY community experience. The testimony we received from 136 department chairs and program chairs across CUNY reveal both the challenges of leading an academic department in an underresourced university and the unacceptable working conditions of all CUNY faculty and professional staff. As faculty leaders, department chairs occupy a unique position in administering the central functions of the University, including everything from managing course scheduling, student advisement, the department's budget and the processes of hiring, tenure and promotion, to marketing the major, solving financial aid crises and satisfying expanding calls for assessment, meeting the needs of their department's faculty (both full-time and contingent), staff and students, and

contending with the realities of increased enrollments and diminishing resources, all in a context of an expanding workload and reduced decision-making authority. Department chairs therefore see CUNY and their individual colleges from multiple angles. Their experiences, insights and recommendations highlight what has happened under systemic disinvestment in the higher education institution charged with serving the needs of New York City's diverse and working-class population.

Based upon the findings of this project, the PSC has drawn attention to the working conditions of department chairs in contract negotiations, because their conditions of work are symptomatic of the conditions under which all CUNY employees work and students learn. PSC leaders are aware that no single contract, no matter how strong, can fully reverse the adverse working conditions that have resulted from decades of disinvestment in CUNY. The union is committed, however, to a long-term battle on behalf of department chairs, including negotiations to gain adequate compensation for the work they perform on behalf of CUNY (whether during the nine-month contract or during the annual leave period), the institutional resources they require to allow faculty, staff and students to do their best work, and the autonomy and authority they need to serve students and the larger community.

# THE STUDY METHOD

Sponsored in part by a grant from New York State United Teachers (NYSUT), the Department Chair Project emerged from a commitment by the PSC leadership to try to address the needs of department chairs through union advocacy, support and collective bargaining. Between February 2016 and July 2017, as proposals for future collective bargaining were being developed, the PSC provided support for two CUNY professors to conduct detailed interviews with 136 current and former department chairs. (There are currently approximately 380 chairs CUNY-wide.) During interviews, project researchers asked department chairs to share the most critical issues they face, and the concerns they have about their own work-life balance as well as the experiences of the faculty, staff and students they lead and serve. The PSC is grateful to those who agreed to participate in this project by giving generously of their time and sharing their experiences and concerns.

The department chairs (as well as a few program directors) interviewed for the project represent the diversity of academic disciplines, professions, departments and conditions experienced across CUNY. Project researchers interviewed department chairs on 12 campuses (with 79 serving at six senior colleges and 57 at six community colleges). Interviews lasted, on average, one hour, with project researchers asking department chairs to discuss the changing educational experiences of faculty, staff and students, and to elaborate on their most important concerns. They also asked department chairs to make suggestions about how the PSC, as well as CUNY Central, could improve the University's learning environment. Project researchers then mapped concerns, trends and recommendations on particular campuses as well as CUNY-wide.

## CENTRAL FINDINGS

The chairs interviewed for this study shared the conviction that most faculty members who accept the role of department chair do so primarily because they believe the position offers the opportunity to provide intellectual and disciplinary leadership to faculty and students, and strategic direction to the department. Unfortunately, the vast majority also confirm that systemic austerity and structural conditions at CUNY have made it increasingly difficult to realize the historic leadership role that inspired them to take on the responsibility.

“I found it shocking to arrive at an underfunded public institution in New York City,” one recently hired department chair commented. The chair had studied at CUNY as an undergraduate, then pursued an academic career at several Ivy League institutions as both a graduate student and faculty member. Like many colleagues who had studied at CUNY, this senior faculty member returned to the University to provide the intellectual sustenance to current students that previous generations had received from the city’s preeminent public university. “CUNY has changed dramatically over the past several decades,” the chair lamented. “I accepted this chair position because I care deeply about public higher education as well as scholarship.” After several years in the role, however, the chair now claims that “CUNY provides a completely unacceptable model for the rest of the nation. Department chairs should be able to empower faculty to do good for students, but this role has been completely undermined at CUNY, by an untenable workload, insufficient compensation and resources, and the erosion of the chairs’ authority and responsibility as faculty leaders within their disciplines.” The chair also noted that the faculty’s rights and obligations to share in the governance of the university have eroded significantly. Other department chairs at CUNY, whether new to the role or long-serving, share these concerns. Reflecting a general sentiment, one chair noted: “Chairs are expected to be on call 24-7, with constant crises meaning that the chair feels guilty if not constantly checking e-mail to put out fires created by managerial bungling.”

Customarily, universities both private and public provide the incentives—time, money and resources—to attract senior members of the faculty to serve as academic department chairs. An increasingly resource-starved CUNY provides few to none of the incentives faculty at other university systems take for granted and that most university administrators recognize as the baseline incentives required to attract senior faculty to the department chair role. Instead, at CUNY, “administrators see the chair as a functionary asked to work in a bureaucratic maze where chairs should shoulder the responsibility but have no authority,” one newly hired chair observed.

Although individual department chairs identified issues and concerns particular to their own departments and campuses, the interviews revealed several CUNY-wide problems that make the lives of CUNY department chairs—and, by extension, the lives of faculty, staff and students—increasingly difficult at both senior and community



colleges. The factors they identified also make the department chair role at CUNY unsustainable as it is presently defined. The structural problems revealed by our study and voiced almost universally by department chairs include:

- the exponential expansion of the department chair's workload, particularly of clerical work;
- the impact of freezes or deferments of full-time faculty hiring;
- insufficient compensation, in both time and money;
- inadequate administrative support and resources;
- the effect on department functions of the shortage of full-time faculty and over-reliance on adjuncts;
- the erosion of faculty governance in ways that undermine the chair's authority to lead the department.

We focus on three of these structural problems.

## The Exponential Expansion of the Department Chair's Workload



*The workload of the chair came as a shock. I didn't imagine the scarcity of resources I would find at CUNY, scarcity I deem more indicative of a third-world nation than a critical public institution in the middle of the wealthiest city in the world.*

CUNY Department Chair

More than 90 percent of all interviewees at both senior and community colleges cited expansion of the department chair's workload as their number-one concern. They noted that over the past decade, in particular, CUNY's administrative services have declined, management has cut departmental operating budgets, technology has increased the workload of all concerned and, perhaps most significantly, CUNY administrators have frozen or deferred filling critical full-time faculty lines as well as the hiring of crucial support staff.

The following statement from a chair who has served CUNY students for more than 30 years illustrates the expanding number of tasks falling to the department chair: "During the course of the semester, I must deal with scheduling, curriculum, reappointments, observations, late adds, audits, annual reports, student complaints, faculty council representation, managing departmental as well as programmatic majors and minors, demands from education departments for courses in disciplines, credits for pipelines, transfer credits, requests for lines, language exemptions, advising, multiple position forms, the needs of the program/major, etc."

Many chairs noted that they must also serve on outcomes-assessment and Middle States accreditation committees, which often have overlapping or redundant missions. In addition, chairs must now complete the large volume of paperwork required by CUNYfirst, DegreeWorks, student audits and, in some cases, bi-weekly work schedules for the college laboratory technicians employed in their departments. They are also responsible for monitoring online course offerings, overseeing course scheduling, student transfer evaluations and payment systems, and answering a torrent of email requests, including those involving students' academic and financial crises. "There's just no end to the work involved," one chair confirmed.


Chairs also stressed an ongoing "administrative creep," as deans and provosts push more of the work once done in their own or other administrative offices down to departments. As a result, chairs are expected to run departments while simultaneously taking on the work (including clerical work) that shrunken or shuttered administrative

student support offices no longer provide. They are expected to manage the clerical functions of departments that often lack staff trained in new requirements or technologies.

The erosion of the ranks of full-time faculty at CUNY is at the heart of the expansion of chairs' workloads. Only 39 percent of undergraduate courses in the senior colleges are now taught by full-time faculty, and only 51.8 percent at the community colleges. The effect is twofold: not only do chairs have to oversee the hiring, observations and evaluations of as many as 100 adjuncts, they also have to shoulder work that would normally be shared by full-time faculty colleagues, whose numbers have shrunk relative to the number of students they must serve. Essential work of departments, such as student mentoring, curriculum development and classroom teaching observations, falls increasingly on the diminished ranks of full-time faculty—or on the chair.

One CUNY department chair and prolific scholar observed, "The workload expected of all faculty is unconscionable and totally out of line with research-oriented institutions nationwide and internationally. CUNY Central," he argued, "just expects and announces that faculty can do more with less without considering the detrimental effects this has on faculty productivity and student success." Another chair hired from outside CUNY described the "workload of the chair [coming] as a shock. I didn't imagine the scarcity of resources I would find at CUNY, scarcity I deem more indicative of a third-world nation than a critical public institution in the middle of the wealthiest city in the world." These are serious dilemmas for all members of the CUNY faculty and staff, but department chairs find them particularly problematic.

One chair notes, "Colleagues elsewhere cringe when we tell them that, at CUNY, the burden [of chairing] tends to fall to associate professors who are deeply devoted to creating change within departments, a devotion that the administration uses to pressure them into service, particularly if they are female and/or people of color." "These conditions," another department leader argues, "make all chairs feel vulnerable, no matter their gender, race or status within the system."



*Chairing counts toward nothing for promotion, and at my institution as well as across CUNY, a disproportionate number of women and faculty of color have been pressured to step into the role, thereby sacrificing themselves to the altar of CUNY's hypocritical emphasis on displaying but not supporting diversity.*

CUNY Department Chair

Pressure to serve as chairs can be particularly acute for early and mid-career faculty, women and people of color, many of whom find themselves pressed to step into the role of chair just after receiving tenure or promotion to associate professor. Frequently these faculty do not have the resources needed to do the jobs asked of them. This challenge is compounded by the fact that on some campuses women faculty and faculty of color are often asked by CUNY to perform “hidden service,” by participating in an exceptional number of committees and roles to amplify (or embellish) CUNY’s commitment to faculty diversity. “Women of color are expected to serve as chairs and to appear on each and every committee the administration and CUNY Central requires of them,” observed another department chair.

The expanding workload, whether hidden or very visible, has caused department chairs CUNY-wide, and particularly chairs from underrepresented groups, to realize that doing the job requires them to devote more and more of their time to an institution that fails to compensate them properly. One faculty member, who was pressured to serve as chair, noted: “Chairing counts toward nothing for promotion, and at my institution as well as across CUNY, a disproportionate number of women and faculty of color have been pressured to step into the role, thereby sacrificing themselves to the altar of CUNY’s hypocritical emphasis on displaying but not supporting diversity.” Many chairs observe that administrators pushed them to step up too early in their careers; the unequal pressure on certain faculty to serve, one department chair noted, is “insulting, humiliating and must change.”

Department chairs identify the following critical issues as major contributory factors to the unsustainable increase in their workload across the CUNY system:

- **Chairs have become departmental “point persons”:** They are expected to be available by email 24 hours, 7 days a week.
- **Technology has increased, not decreased, everyone’s workload:** For example, CUNYfirst contains features that do not align with CUNY’s needs and cannot be customized to align with departmental circumstances, including the allocation of classroom space (another misalignment between management’s belief in cost-saving technology and the needs of faculty and students).
- **The performance of clerical tasks for the administration has eaten into time for faculty leadership:** The abundance of clerical tasks erodes time for 1) mentoring, nurturing and developing junior and mid-career faculty, and 2) guiding curricular reform, pedagogical and scholarly innovation, and other changes to meet the needs of a changing and complex teaching and learning environment.
- **Increased enrollments have forced chairs to problem-solve for critical student supports:** College administrative resources to address students’ registration, financial and other issues have stagnated or declined.

Department chairs are often on the front line, left with the task of meeting the needs of students and faculty when resources fail.<sup>1</sup>

- **The increased use of contingent labor:** The growing imbalance between full-time and contingent labor has created more work for chairs because they increasingly must manage dozens of hourly employees—their hiring, course assignments, their classroom locations and work spaces, their pay, their teaching evaluations and observations—every semester. CUNY’s overreliance on part-time faculty to fill the gap left by underfunding often creates a revolving door of employees with no institutional memory, and little or no time or expectation to perform departmental service. CUNY’s inadequate pay for adjuncts also makes recruitment and retention difficult, and deeply undermines morale in the department as a whole.
- **The deterioration of CUNY’s infrastructure forces chairs to find Band-Aid solutions for a crumbling physical plant:** Chairs must locate solutions or alternatives for the many classrooms that are too hot or too cold and those ill-equipped technologically or spatially to accommodate curricular needs and/or the increased number of students. Chairs are less and less able to keep pace with, no less solve, the expansive operational and physical plant demands of under-resourced college maintenance.

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1. See [http://www.cuny.edu/irdatabook/rpts2\\_AY\\_current/ENRL\\_0012\\_ALLYR\\_TRND.rpt.pdf](http://www.cuny.edu/irdatabook/rpts2_AY_current/ENRL_0012_ALLYR_TRND.rpt.pdf), a CUNY databook revealing that fall semester enrollments increased from 195,403 in 2000 to 220,727 in 2005, and to 272,957 by 2016. Citing “officials” at CUNY Central who boasted about this trend on September 5, 2015, the Daily News reported that CUNY’s enrollment of 278,000 that fall represented an “all-time high.” CUNY’s increase in enrolled students additionally represented “a jump of 42% from 2000, when 195,000 students signed up for fall classes.” (see <http://www.nydailynews.com/new-york/education/exclusive-record-number-students-enroll-cuny-schools-article-1.2349578>). During the same period, public investment in CUNY has stagnated. New York State’s investment in CUNY per full-time equivalent student (FTE) declined by 18 percent between 2010 and 2017. In sum, as the number of students increased and the associated demands on chairs expanded, resources decreased.

## Inadequate Compensation, Support and Resources for Chairs



*Colleagues elsewhere in the profession are shocked to learn about our workload, but they are even more shocked to learn about the chairs' conditions of work, including the lack of compensation we receive.*

CUNY Department Chair

CUNY's compensation for department chairs, whether in time, money or resources, is insufficient to meet the University's expanding demands. One department chair suggested, "For the health of the institution, the position of chair has to be tenable, balanced, with incentives and recognition of the work performed as valuable and adequately compensated." Lacking those elements, more than 70 percent of those interviewed agreed that fewer and fewer faculty members will want to serve as chair, a position that research universities and educational policymakers still see as central to the life of a university.


Department chairs note that the compensation problem is widespread at CUNY and uncompetitive with comparable universities, including public ones. "Colleagues elsewhere in the profession are shocked to learn about our workload," one chair reported, "but they are even more shocked to learn about the chairs' conditions of work, including the lack of compensation we receive throughout the nine-month contract period as well as our summer pay, which is increasingly contingent upon our physical presence on campus, no matter how much labor goes into chairing from home and elsewhere." To run their departments effectively, chairs in departments both large and small need assistance and support. Department chairs consistently cited the need for more reassigned time, both for themselves and for deputy chairs; adequate compensation in the summer and during the academic year; and more highly trained and better-compensated administrative staff support. They explained that deputy chairs can offer important help with scheduling, student advising and other obligations, such as representation at meetings where important resource allocations are decided. Deputies can also help to identify full-time faculty to serve on appointments committees and assist with faculty searches, adjunct hiring, teaching observations and, where appropriate, annual conferences. More specifically, chairs cited:

- **Insufficient reassigned time:** Management has reduced reassigned time allocated to individual departments and rejected proposals for full-time lines to replace those who have retired or left CUNY for better opportunities elsewhere. Presidents ask chairs to "lean in," but provide few supports to enable chairs to take that step. As the many demands

of the work and role multiply, the resources to support and reward chairs have continued to evaporate, and the disjuncture between the expanded role of department chair and the kinds of support required to carry out their duties has become acute.

- **Inadequate department chairs' summer stipends:** Compensation for chairs during the annual leave period underestimates the size and complexity of student and departmental needs. Chairs raised concerns about management's adherence to the provisions of the collective bargaining agreement on summer pay. Clear delineation of responsibilities and compensation during the annual leave period are critical.
- **Inadequate staff support:** The number of full-time, technologically skilled administrative staff in academic departments has declined dramatically over the past two decades. Support staff are usually hourly college assistants and non-teaching adjuncts whose qualifications do not permit them to assist with much of the technological work of the department. The low pay for these positions leads to high turnover rates. Staff reductions in offices of the registrar, financial aid and advising have meant that chairs spend more time than they should correcting mistakes and easing access for their students.

## Erosion of the Chair's Authority and Faculty Governance



*Although I have served as chair for a long time, I will not put myself forward again for another term, and even wonder if I can stand fulfilling the obligations of this one, given the 24-7 nature of the job and lack of respect shown to department chairs by the dean, provost, president and CUNY Central.*

CUNY Department Chair

Many department chairs we interviewed noted that provosts and deans have eroded chairs' authority and the faculty's right to shared governance. One chair observed, "Although the administration sometimes comes through after chairs working together make their concerns loudly known, this is not typical; it is exceptional." Administrators make significant decisions—such as the decision to implement CUNYfirst, to change how remediation and general education are structured, to hire consultants on

academic matters or to embark on University- or college-wide projects—without taking faculty and department chairs’ concerns into consideration. Yet, as several chairs remarked, these decisions often impact the ongoing work of departments and leave chairs having to “clean up the resulting mess.”

Department chairs also reported that members of senior management on every campus have begun to interfere more regularly with the historic prerogatives of chairs and faculty. They cite the imposition of the Pathways curriculum as just one example. “CUNY Central created a Pathways program that totally discounts the need for language and scientific lab training, the liberal arts and critical thinking,” one chair argued. According to most interviewees who touched on the topic, the reason for administrators’ interference in curriculum decisions is generally that they privilege enrollment and graduation numbers over improving the quality of a CUNY education, “rejecting new courses not on pedagogical grounds but rather on financial ones.”

But the problem goes well beyond Pathways, as one senior member of the faculty and chair for 14 years reported: “I have witnessed the ongoing deterioration in faculty morale, faculty governance and the administration’s respect for chairs and faculty. Increasingly administrators, particularly deans, are reaching into departments and undercutting the authority of chairs and faculty,” particularly in searches. “Over the past two years we went through a laborious process of going through résumés, narrowing the field of acceptable candidates in the discipline and presenting to the dean the candidates we wanted to bring to campus,” one chair reported. “This time, the dean canceled department on-campus visits, and instead interviewed candidates himself, even though he has no disciplinary expertise.” Adding insult to injury, the dean then rescinded the tenure-track position that had been promised and offered a substitute position instead. The best candidates often refuse such offers, so searches fail, and the department’s investment in recruitment work produces no result. Candidates then spread the word about CUNY’s lowball offers and failed searches.

Perhaps the most alarming change chairs reported is that presidents, provosts, associate provosts and deans intimate to department chairs that faculty members cannot be trusted to offer productive input to college decision-making. By doing so, administrators try to assert that department chairs have joined the ranks of junior management, and thus have more in common with the administration than with the faculty they were elected to lead. Such treatment has prompted many to say they will not serve as chair again. The decision often occurs despite their initial desire to take on the role to build the department, protect junior faculty and serve students. Indeed, one chair who articulated the sentiments of many noted that “although I have served as chair for a long time, I will not put myself forward again for another term, and even wonder if I can stand fulfilling the obligations of this one, given the 24-7 nature of the job and lack of respect shown to department chairs by the dean, provost, president and CUNY Central.”



# RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSION



*The State has a lot to answer for, but CUNY Central, presidents and other administrators have completely failed to address these issues in ways that make a case to the State.*

CUNY Department Chair

Among the many recommendations chairs made to ensure that the position of department chair becomes more tenable and the long-term viability of CUNY more sustainable, several significant ones stand out:

- **Compensation:** To incentivize professors to take on the burden of chairing departments for the benefit of students, junior and mid-career faculty, and the larger institution, CUNY needs to compensate them properly, in time and money. A reasonable amount of compensation would be teaching no more than one course per year and receiving at least a \$10,000 stipend while serving as chair. Such compensation would be commensurate with what chairs receive at comparable universities, including public universities.
- **Reassigned time:** Every college needs to have a documented, fair and equitable rationale for the reassigned time it currently provides to department and program chairs. The current allocation of reassigned time is too often arbitrary, inequitable and based upon questionable statistics. Consultation with departments and department chairs is needed to create a more equitable formula for reassigned time. The formula should take into account the size of departments and the support systems available to assist with daily, semester-long and year-long demands.
- **Support staff:** Every department needs support staff who have the talents, skills and training needed to meet the challenges of the position. Every department, regardless of size, should have at least one HEO who can help to lighten the administrative load of the department chair.
- **Support for scholarship:** Chairs have little or no time for scholarship, yet CUNY holds them accountable for scholarly production. Consequently, many department chairs see the need for a cap on chair service unless conditions and supports for chairs change substantially. Some chairs recommend a limit on the number of terms or years a chair may serve. Given the current lack of institutional support, some chairs recommend

that department chairs should not have to serve in the summer, allowing them time to do scholarly or creative work. In this case, colleges would have to pay summer deputies to do the work, compensating them properly and providing the training and authorizations they need. A better solution would be to compensate and support chairs fairly while also providing targeted support for their scholarly work.

- **Seniority:** No assistant professor should be pressured to serve as department chair, and no associate professor should serve as a department chair until she or he has begun to meet the scholarly expectations required for promotion to full professor.
- **Full-time faculty:** To meet the educational mission of the University, CUNY needs to place more emphasis on hiring additional full-time faculty members and secure the resources to do so. Administrators, removed from the challenges of instruction and academic discipline, cannot substitute for chairs. CUNY Central needs to ensure that certain administrative work currently done by department chairs is returned to being the responsibility of deans and provosts, that student support service offices are properly staffed and that departments receive the support staff they need.
- **Part-time faculty:** CUNY needs to end its reliance on part-time faculty. Adjunct faculty now teach the majority of the University's courses, a ratio that is a far cry from the goal once routinely included in CUNY Master Plans of 70 percent full-time faculty and 30 percent part-time faculty. The overreliance on adjuncts, coupled with exceptionally low adjunct pay, places special strain on department chairs. Until the "missing" 4,000 full-time faculty positions are restored to CUNY, department chairs will continue to be structurally impeded in their responsibilities.

Beyond these recommendations, department chairs increasingly realize that their conditions of work are merely symptomatic of much larger concerns. "The State has a lot to answer for," one chair argued. The chair added, however, that "CUNY Central, presidents and other administrators have completely failed to address these issues in ways that make a case to the State."

After 10 years of accelerated austerity, many faculty have concluded that they can no longer count on CUNY Central or senior administrators to fight for the dignity our students, staff and faculty deserve. CUNY's future depends on whether the CUNY Board of Trustees and Chancellery can advocate successfully for the public funding CUNY needs. An important first step is to address the degraded working conditions of department chairs, who are arguably the pivotal members of the faculty. Unless department chairs have a new level of support, departmental classroom instruction, research and service to the community cannot flourish. In the absence of such investment, CUNY's reality will be a pale version of its founding aspiration to offer a college education to the whole people of New York.



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