LEADERSHIP QUEST: Department Chair Recruitment, Feedback, and Development

Problem Statement
Recruiting and retaining talented department chairs is a critical way to shape the future of academic medicine (Gmelch, 2000). Yet, studies indicate that searches vary in effectiveness, efficiency, and ability to recruit diverse candidates (Mallon & Buckley, 2012). Although chair recruiting, development, and evaluation have been addressed in the literature, few institutions take a competency-based approach to this work. A few authors (Jennerich, 1981; Hirowaka et al., 1989) address chair competencies. Yet, these competencies have not been operationalized. Given the tremendous influence chairs have on faculty life and institutional culture, a comprehensive talent management approach for chairs is essential for shaping the AHC of the future (Wheeler et al., 2008).

Innovative Approach
The goal of our project was to develop a competency-based talent management model for department chair recruitment, development, and feedback. To do this, we reviewed the literature to draft leadership competencies of successful chairs, which were then widely discussed and vetted by current chairs, search committee members, and leaders.

Competencies of Department Chairs
Leading Team Development
Performance & Talent Management
Commitment to the Tripartite Mission
Communication Skills
Vision & Strategic Planning
Talent Management Model

Chair Recruitment
Applicants are asked to address leadership skills in their letters of interest, and search committees screen every applicant’s letter of interest and CV according to the competencies. Search committee members and interviewers assess candidates on each competency through an electronic survey that has a structured response (high-medium-low) and open-ended questions. The questions used for reference checking and in the interview process also focus on the competency areas.

Chair Development Sessions
We launched a workshop series to create opportunities for chairs to develop knowledge and skills around these competencies. We host quarterly workshops over breakfast or dinner to address these topics. The format allows chairs to share concerns as peers and learn promising practices from each other, cultivating a greater sense of community within the group.

Sample Workshop Topics:
Leading Teams
Creating a Positive Work/Life Culture
Avoiding and Mitigating Legal Issues
Conducting Effective Annual Reviews

Chair Feedback & Assessment
Annually, chairs participate in a department review meeting, where they receive results from our Chair 360° Leadership Survey© or Faculty Vitality Survey©, both of which provide an assessment of the chair’s abilities in each competency area. Reports include comparative information so chairs know where they stand in relation to their peers. These data are also used by the dean to encourage the sharing of promising practices across academic departments.

Lessons Learned
This process has streamlined chair searches and diversified the pool. We have hired eight nationally-known faculty into key leadership positions within the institution, four of whom are women. We have also received positive internal feedback, as measured through program evaluations and requests from departments to adapt the recruitment tools. Given the initial success of the approach, we plan to cascade this process to other departments.

The role of an academic department chair is not getting easier. Addressing how leaders are selected, developed, and assessed, yields tremendous benefits to the institution and is a critical lever for shaping the culture and diversity of an institution. These interventions promote a culture in which chairs feel supported and primed to excel. Although better-prepared chairs do not guarantee success, these programs can only help to encourage leadership and learning.

References