WHAT SHOULD THE ROLE AND STATUS OF THE DEPARTMENT HEAD BE?

William Rife, Chair
for the Instructional Department Heads Council

1. The function of the university's administrative structure is to facilitate the work of the academic departments.

2. The differences in character among the academic departments are so great that no single model of leadership is appropriate to all of them.

3. The categories of functions in departmental leadership can be listed, but their priority is unique to each department.

4. The unique leadership role for each department should be defined by that department, in consultation with the dean and provost.

5. Each department should designate the title of its leader as head or chair.

6. A department's leader should be selected by negotiations among the department's faculty, the dean, and the provost.

7. Defining each leader's role uniquely will facilitate the work of the academic departments, the deans, and the provost.

8. The implementation of greater freedom of leadership for the departments should be gradual.
1. The function of the university's administrative structure is to facilitate the work of the academic departments.

The academic administrative structure at Cal Poly is a pyramid. Responsibility and authority for instruction lie at the base in the faculty. Legal responsibility and authority are vested at the top in the president, who may delegate authority downward.

Accountability runs both ways. The faculty is accountable to the administration for the most effective use of the university's resources; the administration is accountable to the faculty to provide the most favorable environment for excellent instruction.

Because instruction is creative work, it requires freedom of action. Until recently, the freedom of the departments was denied by the reservation of almost all academic decisions to the president. It is now agreed that excellence in instruction will require that each department be given much greater freedom for self-determination.

If the academic administration is to be supportive rather than repressive, it must be designed with the primary aim of reinforcing the progress of the more effective departments, rather than policing the mistakes of the less effective ones. The administrative model should be positive and designed with the better departments in mind; the problems of weaker departments should be treated as exceptions.

2. The differences in character among the academic departments are so great that no single model of leadership is appropriate to all of them.

There are forty-nine academic departments at Cal Poly, and the quantitative differences among them are enormous. The smallest department has 1.55 faculty positions and the largest has 48.10. The number of staff positions per department ranges from 1 to 12, capital inventory from $4,007 to $2,045,784 and annual operating budget from $1599 to $89,981. Twenty-nine of the departments, with 383 faculty positions, are in the professional schools, where up to nearly 100% of instruction is to majors in the department. In the other twenty departments, with 401 faculty positions, up to nearly 100% of the instruction is to non-majors.

The qualitative differences among the departments are greater and more important than the quantitative ones. The primary role of the departments in the professional schools is to provide preprofessional courses for their majors, and the primary role of the departments in the other schools is to provide service courses for majors from the professional schools. In some departments, most of the teaching is done through laboratory work, and in others no labora-
tory work is done. Some departments perceive their primary identification as lying with an industry or with a professional group which is not predominantly academic; other departments have their identification almost completely within higher education.

Departments are at very different stages of development. Some have millennia of academic tradition, and others are less than a decade old. Some have falling enrollments and more tenured faculty members than faculty positions; others have rising enrollments and cannot find enough qualified persons to fill their faculty positions. Perhaps most important for the issue of leadership roles, some of the departments subscribe completely to the deductive principles of a line-administration model, other departments are equally convinced of the necessity for a fully democratic model, and still other departments -- perhaps a majority of them -- need a mixture of the two forms of administration for maximum benefit.

3. The categories of functions in departmental leadership can be listed, but their priority is unique to each department.

It is possible to prepare a list which comprises most of the functions of all of the department heads. The following list is one example.

**Academic Functions:** Teach and pursue professional development.

**Personnel Functions:** Hire faculty members and evaluate them for re-appointment, promotion, and tenure. Evaluate faculty members informally and counsel them appropriately to their stages of development. Hire, evaluate, and supervise staff members. Overall: maintain morale and provide a model of professional performance.

**Managerial Functions:** Supervise spending, space allocations, scheduling, and manpower uses. Represent departmental interests to the administration. Transmit administrative directives to the department and implement university policies in the department. Prepare reports on departmental performance. Decide on petitions from students on such matters as course withdrawals and deviations, and from faculty members on such matters as leaves.

**Governmental Functions:** Maintain processes in the department by which short-range problems can be solved and routine decisions -- such as those involved in catalog preparation -- can be made. Maintain processes by which long-range planning can be carried out to achieve the department's goals.
**Development Functions:** Raise funds. Recruit students. Establish or enhance relations with alumni, off-campus professional groups, or industries.

A list of this kind may be useful for some purposes, but if it leads to the conclusion that the positions of the department heads across the university are substantially the same, it is seriously misleading. Such a list is not a description of anyone's job, it is a composite overlay of the jobs of forty-eight persons. Misunderstanding of this point has led to much unproductive discussion.

The unique needs of each department elicit from among the subheadings of this list a unique set of priorities which the department head must pursue. For example, the head of one department may spend almost all of her time pursuing professional development, hiring faculty members, helping faculty members arrange leaves, developing long-range planning, and raising money, while the head of another department may spend almost all of his time teaching, counseling faculty members, scheduling, and recruiting students. To string the functions of these two persons together on one list and then conclude from the list that they have the same job, is a foolish mistake, and potentially a harmful one. They have different jobs.

The question of what a department head does cannot be deduced from a job description in the Campus Administrative Manual, it must be arrived at inductively by identifying what it is that each department head in fact does. The constellation of priorities for the department head will be unique for each department and will change continuously, at a rate which will vary from one department to the next. Generalized job descriptions probably provide more trouble than help.

4. The unique leadership role for each department should be defined by that department, in consultation with the dean and provost.

It is possible to compile a list of all of the functions of all of the department heads, but such a list is not a description of the job of any one department head. The roles of the individual department heads are unique, and so diverse that no single job description can be prepared which both honors their diversity and is operationally useful. There is no such thing as a job description for the department head, if that term is used collectively. Forgetfulness of this point has led to much confusion.
It is sometimes necessary or useful to prepare a job description for the leadership role of a particular department. This should be done, for example, when a new department head is to be appointed, when the role of the department head has changed markedly in a short time, or when there is disagreement among concerned parties as to what the role should be.

The identification of the functions of the leadership role in a department, and their priorities, is likely to be crucial to the well-being of the department. It should be carried out by means of careful consultations among the faculty members of the department, the dean, and the provost. A serious job description for the leadership role is tantamount to a definitive statement of the state and future of the department, and it will do much to determine that future; it should be prepared with thought and care. It should consist of a list, of reasonable length, of the functions essential for a leader of the particular department, with a clear statement as to their relative priorities. It should include a projection of how those functions and their priorities may be expected to change over the succeeding few years.

Such a list cannot be exhaustive or precise, and it cannot replace day-to-day judgment by the department leader as to what the priorities of his or her work should be. But the careful, empirical development of such a description will provide a much more practical basis for beneficial leadership than the abstract descriptions of the department head's role which are now the official definitions.

5. Each department should designate the title of its leader as head or chair.

The terms head and chair have approximate meanings which are widely recognized in higher education. In some departments at Cal Poly, analysis of the leadership role will show that the position should be designated as head, and the faculty will prefer that name; in other departments, the role and faculty preference will require the title chair. The name we choose should correspond to the function we designate and to the view of the faculty members in a given department as to what is the appropriate term for their discipline. There is no need to impose a single term on all of the departments.

The definition and designation of one position as that of head and another as chair shall not be taken to rank one above the other as to importance or difficulty, or to establish a salary difference between them. The chair of a very large department may have much more difficult duties than the head of a very small one.
Since salary is one of the most important measures of responsibility, the salary for each head or chair position should be individually established, to be commensurate with its uniqueness. As one protection against inequity, a list of the salaries of all heads and chairs shall be published annually to all of them.

6. A department's leader should be selected by negotiations among the department's faculty, the dean, and the provost.

The selection of a departmental leader is crucial. The first step in the selection process should be the careful preparation of a specific job description by the departmental faculty, the dean, and the provost, as described in section 4 above. The job description arrived at should also contain the term of the appointment, the method by which performance would be evaluated, and the salary. In the later stages of selection, the candidates for the position would enter into further negotiations on all of these matters.

The president holds the legal right to appoint the leader of a department, and to remove him or her for adequate cause. In the worst possible case of a department which refused to undertake negotiations in good faith toward selecting a leader, the president would retain the right to appoint one.

7. Defining each leader's role uniquely will facilitate the work of the academic departments, the deans, and the provost.

The function of administration is to facilitate instruction. The needs of each department are unique, and they give rise to a unique set of priority functions for the leader of the department.

Each department will be served best if the role of its leader is specifically defined according to its unique needs. Each leader will be selected best, work best, and be evaluated best if his or her position is defined in terms which address realistically the unique day-to-day demands of his or her assignment, and he or she will be frustrated if the description of what is expected of him or her does not match the reality of what is required.

The dean and the provost can know little of the work of each department head at first hand. They will be ill-served by a vocabulary and a set of generalizations which mislead them into believing that the leaders of different departments have the same job. Decisions based on this oversimplification will be wrong decisions.
The role and status of each department leader will be unique and should be uniquely defined. Recognizing the uniqueness of each leader's role will make the perceptions of the deans and the provost truer, and it will give to the academic departments some measure of the freedom which creative work requires.

8. The implementation of greater freedom of leadership for the departments should be gradual.

The process of defining the leadership role according to the needs of each department, by consultation among the department faculty, the dean, and the provost, should occur either (a) as the department head's position becomes vacant or (b) as the department faculty, the department head, the dean, and the provost may agree, beginning in September, 1984. (From 1973 to 1983, an average of about five new department heads per year were appointed.)
Memorandum

Tomlinson Fort, Jr.
Provoest

Academic Senate

Date: March 1, 1985

File No.: 

Copies: Instructional Deans
Instructional Dept. Heads
Janet Pieper
Reginald Gooden

From: Warren J. Baker
President

Subject: THE ROLE AND STATUS OF THE INSTRUCTIONAL DEPARTMENT HEAD

Enclosed is a document on the THE ROLE AND STATUS OF THE INSTRUCTIONAL DEPARTMENT HEAD submitted to the Academic Senate by the Instructional Department Heads Council and subsequently endorsed by the Academic Senate at their meeting on January 15, 1985. I support the administrative concepts contained in this document and would like you and the deans to begin the implementation of the recommendations.

As a first step, the Deans’ Council should develop a statement of duties common to all department heads at Cal Poly. This statement will, of necessity, be general and not include all department head functions. The statement should be reviewed and endorsed by the councils of each school. Then, using the general statement as a starting point, the deans should confer with the faculty and department heads in their schools to develop comprehensive statements for our review and approval on the role and responsibilities of heads of individual departments. The statements should include an assessment of the administrative and assigned time required to carry out the specified leadership and administration duties.

So as to clarify reporting relationships, I am delegating responsibilities for the terms and conditions of department head appointments to the deans. Department heads will be appointed by and serve at the pleasure of the deans. Each dean will be responsible for overseeing the consultative process in his/her school, and conferring with the Provost and President before making final selection of a department head. Selection of department heads should be in conformance with affirmative action goals and guidelines, and with CAM.

It is apparent that there are insufficient administrative positions available to provide for the administrative needs of all departments. After we have established an appropriate target for administrative time in each school, we should give a high priority to reallocation of administrative time to address the shortage of positions in academic administration. Responsibility for the allocation of administrative time within a school should be delegated to the deans. Furthermore, the deans and faculty in each school may avail themselves of the opportunity to use assigned time to assist departmental leadership in carrying out responsibilities directly related to instruction, curriculum development, and participation in academic committees.
Memorandum

To: Tomlinson Fort, Jr.

Date: November 27, 1984

From: Warren J. Baker

File No.:

Copies: Randal Cruikshanks
Bill Rife
Reg Gooden

Subject: ROLE AND STATUS OF DEPARTMENT HEADS

I met with Randal Cruikshanks and Bill Rife regarding the paper that has been prepared on the "Role and Status of Department Heads." The main point of our discussion had to do with creating a more flexible way of describing the role of department heads in the University so that departments with widely varying needs might be better accommodated. There are various methods by which this may be achieved, including reallocation of some resources to solve the problem of inadequate time to carry out the functions of the positions. It is important that we engage in a full discussion of the methods available to us and the implications of various methods.

This, of course, cannot be considered in isolation by each department but needs to be integrated into the objectives and administrative structure in each of the schools, taking into account our limitations. Since this issue will be discussed before the Academic Senate shortly, I would like you to invite Randal Cruikshanks and Bill Rife to a Deans' Council meeting to afford the deans an opportunity to hear the suggestions being made, to raise the implications of this proposal, and to explore various methods of solving the problem. The role of the deans in this discussion is crucial, and the deliberations of the Academic Senate will be enhanced with the benefit of the views from deans and department heads.

In summary, I think we may be able to make progress in solving our problems, within current limitations, provided we can reach a general consensus that moving toward the adoption of methods (organizational, financial, and reallocation) that will alleviate the problems should be given a high priority.

I will attend the meeting to express my own views on the methods available to us if the schedule does not conflict.