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# Academic Leadership Program

## Message from the Director

As many of you know by now, I will be taking on the role of Dean of Arts on July 1. I actually feel slightly foolish that in Issue 1 of this Newsletter, I included a little feature introducing myself, and now in Issue 3, I'm saying good-bye. Such are the unexpected vicissitudes of life.

I wanted to let you all know that the past three years working with the program have been extremely enjoyable and a great learning experience for me. So I wanted to say thank you to you all for your suggestions, your support, and your patience with my Outlook adversities. I also want to say a special thank you to Beth Jewkes (former Associate Provost, Resources) and Mario Coniglio (Associate VP Academic) for their support of the program, as well as to my frequent helpers, such as Matt Erickson (Conflict Management & Human Rights), Alice Raynard (Secretariat), Linda Brogden (Occupational Health), Tom Ruttan (Counselling), and the many others who regularly stepped up to the plate with their expert and generous assistance. And an especially big thank you to my friend and colleague, Katrina Di Gravio (Director, Organizational and Human Development) – could not have done this without you!

**Sheila Ager, (almost) Quondam Director, Academic Leadership Program**

## UW Academic Leader Profile: James Rush, Vice-President Academic & Provost

After completing a BSc and MSc at the University of Guelph, a PhD at the Health Sciences Centre at SUNY Syracuse, and a post-doctoral position at the University of Missouri–Columbia, James ('Jim') Rush joined the University of Waterloo in 2000 as an Assistant Professor in the Department of Kinesiology (Faculty of Applied Health Sciences). Even before receiving tenure and promotion to Associate in 2005, he held a CIHR–Canada Research Chair in Integrative Vascular Biology (2003–2013). Jim's research interests lie particularly in the area of regulation of blood vessel function in the context of cardiovascular health and disease; over the past two decades, he has published/participated in dozens of refereed articles,



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book chapters, abstracts, and symposia presentations. As a teacher, Jim has supervised numerous graduate students and has taught physiology and vascular biology across a wide range of courses, introductory and senior, large and small, to outstanding student evaluations.

Like many individuals who find themselves taking on significant academic leadership roles, Jim describes the beginning of his academic service career as “mostly accidental”. He thoroughly enjoys both the research and the teaching sides of academic life, and when he began his career, he had no plans to move into administration. Shortly after arriving at UW, Jim was asked to take on an Acting Associate Dean role for a year; he found some of the work entailed intellectually engaging, but had no expectation at that time of continuing along a continuous service path. However, after stepping down from the role (and taking his only sabbatical ever), Jim was asked to step in as Associate Chair, Graduate, for Kinesiology; and after a year in this role, he was encouraged to let his name stand for the position of Chair, a role which he held from 2009 through 2013.

As Chair of Kinesiology, Jim feels that he was effective largely because he did not enter the role with a preconceived personal agenda. Instead, he worked to create a common shared vision with his Departmental colleagues. He took the same approach when he became first, at the request of the Provost, Interim Dean of AHS (2014-2015), and then Dean (2015-2018). Jim emphasizes that, both as Chair and as Dean, relationships are crucial: a network of positive relationships of trust and collegiality provides a solid base for collaborative visioning and action. At the same time, Jim cautions that those who take on administrative roles such as Chair or Dean need to be prepared for the challenges posed by those who may not always respond well to individuals in leadership positions. When asked what advice he might have for younger faculty members contemplating taking on service roles, Jim stresses that his own path is somewhat unusual, and that it is possible to take an administrative position on a test drive for a finite period without locking oneself into a permanent career of service. Nevertheless, it is important, Jim believes, to commit fully to the job at hand and give it what it needs, and to be fully aware of the potential impact on one’s teaching and research.

Jim became UW’s Vice-President Academic & Provost on 1 July 2018. As with the other academic leadership positions he has held, it was not a long-held career ambition of his to step into this role; however, after extensive encouragement from others, Jim says that he came to see the opportunities that such a position might provide for making a positive contribution to the University. As VPAP, Jim serves as the University’s “chief academic officer, chief operating officer, and chief operating budgetary officer”.

This naturally leaves him with a great deal of spare time on his hands.

## The View from Three Outgoing Chairs

### Colin MacLeod, Psychology:

It’s been 7 years for me (with one year off in the middle for what I hope was good behavior). Honestly, it has been a privilege to serve and it has gone by very quickly. I really feel that being Chair of one’s Department is the best administrative “gig” in the university. It is a chance to represent the interests of your colleagues, and sometimes even to help them.



So, what have I learned? Before I even started, friends from other universities who had been Chairs said “don’t take Chair work home.” I followed this edict, and I think it was good advice. I also adopted the strategy of not reading departmental email on weekends because there really isn’t much you can do then about whatever the issue is.

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Being Chair means you become in many ways a member of the Departmental staff, and you quickly realize how terrific they are and how much we all—especially Chairs—rely on their knowledge and skills. This also helps to make you realize that the Chair job is a “desk job” in many ways, so it’s important not to let the many things that need doing daily pile up.

Being Chair requires building trust, and I was often reminded of the Hemingway quote: “If you want to know if you can trust someone, trust them.” It is of course important to keep confidences. It is also important to appoint good people around you (as Associate Chairs, for example), people you can trust to be your sounding board(s). As well, when I asked colleagues to help and explained why their help was needed, they almost always said yes and contributed.

I found going to other people’s offices to chat was a good way to prevent the notion that everyone must come to the Chair’s (i.e., “the Principal’s”) office. I also avoided doing everything via email. Email, as we all have learned, can be misunderstood, especially because it may be read as stern or harsh when that was not the intention. Particularly when someone is clearly emotional, it is important not to react quickly—much better to say “we should talk,” perhaps adding “very soon.” Where you are in a difficult meeting, taking notes and then sending them to those who attended the meeting to ask if you have captured the issue(s) helps to avoid miscommunication or misremembering later.

Perhaps the most pleasant part of the job is dealing with career progress, especially for younger colleagues. I tried to meet often with newer colleagues to build their culture, in teaching and in research and in service. I also really enjoyed honouring people’s successes, both personally to them and publicly to the Department. That included putting together nomination packages for Fellow status in their societies, award nominations, and the like.

All in all, it’s been a really great experience, one that I encourage you to give serious thought to. I’m always impressed by how often people who take Chair positions are willing to serve a second term—evidence that it is indeed a fulfilling position.

### Paul Fieguth, Systems Design Engineering



I have been asked whether I might have important advice for chairs, under the presumption that after having been chair for some time (since 2010) I might have accumulated some wisdom along the way.

I will preface my thoughts with my observation that departments are remarkably different from one another; this is mostly a good thing, in that heterogeneity and variety are important ingredients of academic flexibility and vitality. However, it also means that what succeeds or fails in one department may proceed quite differently in another, so please do not take my thoughts as prescriptive.

For me, the greatest reward has been the group of friends and colleagues whom I have met and worked with in my role as chair. This has particularly been other chairs (such as at our monthly lunch meetings), the leadership team within my department, and the chairs and associate deans in Engineering with whom I meet weekly. I have overwhelmingly found my university leadership colleagues to be absolutely sincere in their desire to make the university a better place.

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The other great reward is the opportunity to have an impact on the department, whether big or small. Even in the absence of any budget (which was frequently the case, for me), there are significant organizational, programmatic, and attitudinal changes which are possible.

My advice and challenge relate directly to both of these rewards. In term of your colleagues, appreciate their support and likewise support them. Life, and your time as department chair, are too short to allow politics and frustrations (while sometimes unavoidable) to get in the way for very long.

In terms of impact, the day-to-day sense of impact can be negligible, or zero (or negative), however when one looks over a period of many years, significant changes can be seen. I wish that I had been more conscious of these changes, or at least been aware of the impact that I was having, because that would have offered me a valuable sense of progress. So make an effort to observe and reflect on your accomplishments.

Finally, my advice is to be careful not to be indefinitely swallowed by minutiae. Whether this is an administrative-download problem, or the consequence of 24/7 connectivity, or ever-increasing expectations, my sense is that it is possible to work at being chair all day, essentially never leaving your email inbox, and still never be fully caught up. For me this was often a quite frustrating dilemma, because I don't like doing things poorly or incompletely. Yet you can drive yourself crazy, to fragmentation, insisting on completing every step, and likely wearing down yourself (and, by extension, the department) in the process. I would have benefited from learning much earlier to delegate: your job as chair is to guide the department, not to single-handedly do too much of the work.

Work with your colleagues, be kind to yourself, and accept that from time to time certain tasks will simply not get done. And take time to smell the roses: there are parts of the chair's job that are enjoyable, be sure to take the time to enjoy them!

### **Margaret Insley, Economics:**

With my days as Economics Department chair on the wane, I was asked to write about what knowledge or insights might have helped me when I first took on the role in July 2011. At that time, my administrative experience in the university was somewhat limited, having served as graduate associate chair for only one year prior to being appointed as chair. I knew that I had a lot to learn. However, excellent staff and support from outgoing chair, John Burbidge, helped me ease into the role without any major disasters. Below are some thoughts on what I have learned over the past eight years, and what might have been helpful to know ahead of time.



You are likely more ready for the role than you think. Even though my university administrative experience was limited, I benefited from experience in previous volunteer roles I had had in the community. I had served on and chaired a Board of Trustees in a different organization, and I found myself drawing on those experiences. How to lead a productive meeting, developing policies, how to build relationships with people, how to deliver disappointing news, how to be firm in specifying expectations – these are all skills that can be learned through practice in various settings.

Departmental staff are really important. Until I became chair, I was not aware of all that staff do in the department. However it soon became clear that I needed to learn more about staff responsibilities, and to think intentionally about the best division of labour between chairs, associate chairs and staff. My advice to a new chair is to meet regularly with staff and learn about how things are going from their perspective.

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Communication including “face time” is as important as you think it is. Once someone becomes chair, their interactions with their colleagues inevitably change. I was worried that people might be less frank with me and that I might not be aware of potential trouble or brewing irritations. To avoid this as much as possible, I vowed to focus on communication in the department. Sometimes I succeeded at this, and other times less so – particularly in very busy times when communication fell down my priorities list. This is always a mistake. Good communication is one of the most important factors for being a successful chair. Practices that I tried to cultivate included:

- Being present in the department with my door partially open so that people feel free to speak to me.
- Emailing department members on a fairly regular basis with information and updates including department news, congratulating people on achievements etc.
- Having lunch in our lounge fairly regularly - but not too often.
- Talking to people one-on-one, rather than just responding to email.
- Giving praise and words of thanks regularly.
- Seeking advice frequently. Associate chairs, other department chairs, faculty and staff, and the Dean can all provide useful and different perspectives.
- Work the halls, i.e. wander down the halls periodically and have a quick chat with anyone whose door is open. Ask for opinions about controversial issues. In hindsight, I wish I had done this more often.

At the start of my second term it was agreed through department consultations that we should devote some of our precious and scarce department space to a departmental lounge. The Arts Faculty provided funding to buy some comfy furniture. In my opinion, the investment has been well worth it. Those casual interactions and conversations facilitated by space such as a lounge, help build relationships which support the important work of the department – such as building consensus about new programs or making decisions about departmental priorities. If you need to argue with your Dean for resources for your lounge, you can point to the updated Canada Food Guide which says we should all be eating meals with others.

You have very limited power to change the behavior of others. One of my goals as chair was to be sure that department members were engaged and taking seriously their responsibility to participate departmental life. As professors, there can be a tendency to be more like independent operators (I have it on good authority that a former senior administrator got into trouble by saying that University of Waterloo faculty are like “small business operators who share a parking lot.”). We engage in research with other academics in our field, who may or may not be department members. As teachers we engage with students, but not so much with other faculty. However, a successful department needs the full participation of its faculty members. From my experience at various chairs’ forums, such as the Academic Leadership Program, difficulties in promoting faculty engagement is a key frustrations faced by many chairs. While a department chair’s levers are quite limited, here are some of the practices I found to be helpful:

- Praise and reward those who do the service work and participate in the life of the department. You can’t do much about those who don’t.
- Make sure departmental documents, such as Annual Performance Review Guidelines, reflect the general consensus about the importance of participation in department life. For example in Economics our Annual Performance Review Guidelines state the following: “There is an expectation that all faculty members contribute to a vibrant and collegial department in academic and professional matters. One aspect of good departmental citizenship is presence in the department and active participation in the academic life of the department throughout the year.”
- Delegate important roles to others through the creation of ad hoc committees and task forces. This can reduce burden on the chair and associate chairs and allows others to help shape how the department functions, bringing new ideas into the mix.

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### Some Journals of Interest:

Academic Leader  
Academic Matters  
CAUT Bulletin  
Chronicle of Higher Education  
The Department Chair  
Inside Higher Ed  
University Affairs



- Circulate annually a list of the service tasks of department members, including those outside the department. This makes people aware of the variety of service roles available in the university, some of which are not highly visible.

It takes work to be seen as a chair who is even-handed, not favouring one group over another. This was a key goal for me and I found it's not always easy to attain, particularly when divisions arose in the department over some thorny issue or another. My tactics included some of the following:

- Have someone else in the department champion new initiatives that are controversial. This often happens naturally, since new program ideas typically come from the grad and undergrad committees.
- In department meetings try to summarize both sides of any disagreement. Provide those summaries before important meetings when decision need to be made.
- Take the time needed to build consensus by talking to people prior to meetings. Informal forums outside of department meetings can also be helpful. (See "work the halls" noted above.)
- Call people on non-collegial behavior. Speak to individuals in person if you think they need to be reminded of the importance of maintaining respectful communication.

Prioritize personal survival. The chair's job is often very busy. In order not to be overwhelmed, I recommend not trying to get an A-grade all the time. When faced with an administrative task, my practice was to rank it in terms of its importance. If I judged it to be not terribly crucial, I would aim for a B or even a C. If the results of my efforts were not adequate, I expected I would hear about it, and could make adjustments and revisions as needed.

The time of the chair renewal decision can be awkward. The current policy on chair appointments can accommodate the situation when someone definitely wants to be considered for a second term, as well as when someone definitely does not want to be considered for a second term. The policy does not deal well with the situation when the current chair might be willing to do a second term, but would be very happy to have someone else step into the role if they are interested in doing so. If you are in this situation, I recommend being proactive, letting others, including your Dean know about this, well before the renewal process begins.

When I first took on the role, numerous people were offering condolences. This was unnecessary. I can honestly say that I have (mostly) enjoyed my time as chair. But after eight years, I am also very glad to stepping aside. I wish the best of luck to incoming Economics Chair, Lutz Busch!

## The Digest

**A 6 September 2018 blog from EAB** (the Education Advisory Board) talks about reasons why we should all laugh more at work. Citing a variety of authorities on the subject, the post identifies three chief reasons, explaining "why we need more laughter at work and how to use humor strategically": humour leads to creative problem-solving; humour creates a collaborative culture; and humour diffuses the tension.

## Inspirational (?) Quote

*Against the assault of laughter, nothing can stand.*

— Mark Twain