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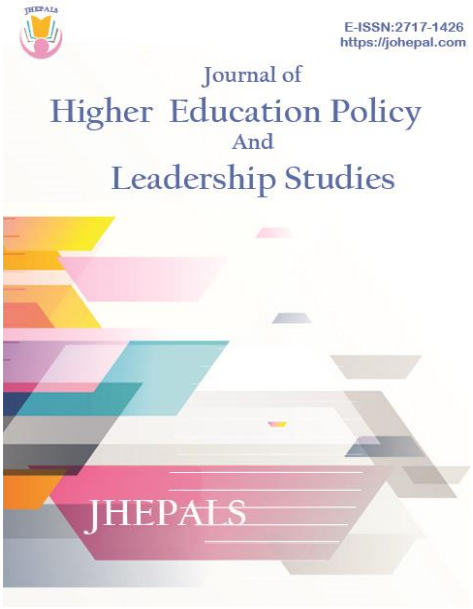

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Scaling Leadership Support: Evidence-Informed Workload Policies for Department Chairs in Growing Public Universities

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Abstract

This study investigates how institutional growth and department size shape department chair leadership effectiveness, providing evidence-based policy recommendations for higher education governing boards, institutional administrators, and policymakers. Drawing on mixed-methods data from 67 chairs and directors at a large U.S. public research university (42% response rate) and follow-up interviews (n=11), the study examines how perceived administrative workload, time pressure, and leadership development needs vary systematically by department size. Findings reveal that chairs of large departments (40+ faculty) face fundamentally different administrative demands than chairs of small departments (≤20 faculty), while medium-sized units experience disproportionate personnel management challenges. Yet most institutions apply uniform workload policies, course release allocations, and support structures across all department sizes. Chairs overwhelmingly prioritize structural solutions—dedicated administrative staff, streamlined processes, and size-calibrated workload models—over professional development programming. The study provides a policy framework for differentiated leadership support, including scaled course release formulas, size-appropriate administrative staffing models, and targeted leadership development investments. These findings offer governing boards, senior administrators, and state-level policymakers an evidence-based roadmap for designing sustainable academic leadership infrastructure that aligns resources with organizational complexity.

Keywords: Leadership Policy; Academic Leadership; Department Chairs; Workload Policy; Organizational Design; Leadership Development

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Introduction

Effective department chair leadership is fundamental to institutional success, yet higher education policy and governance structures often fail to provide the differentiated support necessary for chairs to lead effectively across diverse organizational contexts. Department chairs exercise significant decision-making authority and have direct impact on faculty job satisfaction, departmental culture, and institutional outcomes (Harris et al., 2016; Morris & Miller, 2008). However, a critical policy gap exists: as universities grow and departmental complexity increases, institutional workload models, administrative support structures, and leadership development policies have not kept pace with the demands placed on chairs (Weaver et al., 2019). Prior research consistently shows that department chairs experience high levels of stress, role overload, and conflict between administrative and scholarly responsibilities (Gmelch & Burns, 1993; Kruse, 2022; Lumpkin & Jones, 2023). Recent analyses describe the chairship as "the toughest job in higher education," emphasizing expanded responsibilities for budgeting, assessment, and personnel management alongside traditional faculty work (Lumpkin & Jones, 2023). Studies demonstrate that work pressure and time constraints impair decision-making effectiveness among academic leaders (Al-Zoubi et al., 2024). Yet institutional policies—governing course release, administrative staffing support, compensation, and term limits—remain largely uniform across departments of vastly different sizes and complexity levels, creating a structural mismatch between chair responsibilities and allocated resources.

This policy misalignment has profound implications for institutional governance and leadership sustainability. Many chairs return to faculty status instead of progressing to administrative positions because of frustration (Morris & Miller, 2008), representing a critical failure in organizational capacity-building and signaling that current human resource policies for academic leadership are unsustainable. Department chairs are caught between faculty and upper administration, a "middle-management squeeze" intensified by enrollment growth policies that increase departmental responsibilities without proportional investment in infrastructure or size-appropriate support systems. For university governing boards, senior administrators, and state-level policymakers, this pattern raises urgent questions: How should leadership support policies be differentiated based on organizational complexity? What evidence should inform workload allocation models? How can institutions design sustainable leadership development systems that prevent burnout and build administrative capacity?

How institutional growth without commensurate resource allocation, combined with one-size-fits-all approaches to chair roles, undermines both leadership effectiveness and institutional strategic goals is the central policy problem. Major challenges include lack of leadership training, role conflict, and ambiguity (Gmelch, 2015). These individual-level challenges are compounded by organizational design and governance failures: institutions lack evidence-based policies for differentiating workload expectations, administrative support, and leadership development based on department size and complexity. Only 3% of department chairs receive training before assuming their roles (Gaubatz & Ensminger, 2017; Gmelch, 2015), representing a massive gap in organizational investment. A recent systematic review of university department leadership (2006–2025) underscores persistent gaps in leadership preparation, calling for enhanced training, clearer recognition of the

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department head role, and better resourcing of leadership teams (Álvarez-Álvarez, 2025). Current workload allocation policies fail to account for how administrative burdens scale with department size, creating systematic inequities in chair workload and effectiveness across units of different sizes. This results in academic leaders working longer hours, with less time for research, and higher stress and burnout (Morris & Laipple, 2015; Weaver et al., 2019), outcomes that constrain institutional capacity to develop the leadership pipeline necessary for long-term governance stability.

Significance of the Study

Although organizational studies suggest that department size and disciplinary paradigm influence chair tenure and leadership dynamics (Pfeffer & Moore, 1980), few empirical studies have directly examined how department size and institutional growth shape chairs' experiences of administrative workload and time pressure. Existing chair research largely focuses on stress, role conflict, or decision making in the aggregate (Gmelch & Burns, 1993; Kruse, 2022; Lumpkin & Jones, 2023) rather than examining variation in administrative workload as units expand or institutions grow. Chairs report different challenges based on department size, which may be attributed to the structure or difference in resources available to them (Weaver et al., 2019). Yet no empirical studies have translated these size-based differences into actionable policy recommendations for workload models, staffing ratios, or leadership development investments.

A small but growing number of university policies explicitly link teaching load reductions and administrative expectations for chairs to department size and program characteristics (Miami University, 2024; Tennessee State University, n.d.). However, these policies are typically justified normatively rather than empirically; they rarely draw on systematic quantitative and qualitative evidence about how department size and institutional change shape the day-to-day work of chairs and directors. Outside of some practitioner-oriented reports (e.g., EAB's "From local manager to strategic partner"), there is little peer-reviewed research that integrates survey and interview data to inform differentiated workload policies and targeted administrative support for academic unit leaders (EAB, n.d.). Consistent with EAB's portrayal of chairs as increasingly expected to function as strategic partners rather than local managers, emerging evidence suggests expanding expectations in budgeting, assessment, and external engagement without commensurate increases in authority or support.

This study responds to these gaps by providing mixed-methods evidence on how department size shapes administrative workload and leadership effectiveness, and by translating findings into a practical policy framework for institutional leaders, governing boards, and state-level policymakers. The study documents a systematic association between department size and perceived administrivia to illustrate how institutional growth amplifies leadership pressures in large public research settings and provides evidence-based recommendations for differentiated workload policies, administrative support structures, and leadership development investments.

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Research Methodology

This mixed methods research study examined chairs' biggest challenges, with attention to department size, and recommended strategies among chairs and directors at one of the largest public research universities in the U.S. The study design was intentionally structured to generate policy-relevant evidence by linking qualitative experiences to quantifiable organizational characteristics (department size), enabling the development of differentiated policy recommendations. An online survey with both quantitative and qualitative questions was sent to all chairs and directors from the provost's office (n=67; 42% response rate), along with phone interview follow-up (n=11). Quantitative statistics and qualitative data were first analyzed separately; then themes and codes from survey and phone interviews were cross-analyzed with department size to identify patterns that could inform size-differentiated institutional policies and support structures.

Measures

Quantitative measures included chair background (years as chair, gender, number of full-time faculty, and number of students). These organizational metrics were selected to enable analysis of how structural characteristics (size, complexity) relate to leadership challenges and resource needs. Survey questions also explored potential training program topics that might be of interest (e.g. adjusting roles of being chairs/directors; dealing with difficult people/managing conflict; building a trusting work environment; maintaining work-life balance/stress recovery) and preferred training format (webcourses, live workshops, 2-3 days retreat, monthly chair circle) to inform institutional decisions about professional development investments and delivery models.

The qualitative measure asked one key research question: When it comes to being an effective department chair, what's the single biggest challenge, frustration or problem that you've been struggling with? This open-ended approach allowed chairs to identify challenges in their own terms, providing authentic voice to inform policy priorities.

Three open-ended questions were asked during interviews to gain a deeper understanding of biggest challenges, recommended strategies or solutions, and additional insights. The focus on recommended strategies was deliberately included to generate actionable policy options grounded in chairs' practical experience. Each interview was recorded and transcribed for analysis.

Analyses

Qualitative data on the biggest challenges and recommended strategies were analyzed via open, axial, and selective coding. Department units were grouped into 3 categories: small (1-20 full-time [FT] faculty), medium (21-40 FT faculty), and large (41+ FT faculty). This classification system was designed to reflect organizational thresholds where management demands and resource needs may shift qualitatively, enabling policy-relevant comparisons. Mixed methods results were analyzed via qualitative and quantitative data. Dedoose software was used for qualitative coding and mixed methods data analyses. Normalized percent (%) counts were used to adjust for departments across each size group. Results were interpreted with explicit attention to translating patterns into actionable policy and

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management recommendations. This study received exempt approval from the study Institutional Review Board (#STUDY00003380).

Results

Average number of full-time faculty was 33 (range: 3-100). Mean student size per unit was 1,500 (ranged 100 to 5,500). About 75% of chairs were in their initial 5-year term, 14% in their 2nd term and a small number in their 3rd term (7%) or fourth term (4%). This concentration of new chairs (75%) has important implications for leadership development policy, suggesting that onboarding and early-career support should be institutional priorities. About 28.6% chairs lead small departments (fewer than 20 faculty), 39.3% lead medium departments (21-39 faculty), and 32.1% lead large units (40+ full-time faculty). This distribution indicates substantial heterogeneity in organizational complexity across chair positions, yet institutional policies typically treat these roles as equivalent (Table 1).

Table 1.
The biggest challenges of being chairs and directors

The biggest challenges	Supporting quotes from chairs and directors
Managers vs Leaders	I am a paper-pushing manager rather than an academic leader. No time to be leaders – busy to be managers / administrative. I believe we have already received all the training. The shear about of bureaucracy and administrivia to handle on a daily basis kills any possibility of strategic thinking. I'm supposed to be LEADING the dept, not just MANAGING it.
Lack of Time!!	Lack of time. I spend considerable time on administrative tasks that are not done by chairs in similar departments at other schools (Approving requests, travel, grade changes, payroll, etc. take up a lot of time; in fact, much more time now that it is done electronically; once, I had a pile of forms that I could review and sign quickly, now I have to click through multiple screens....) The biggest challenge is managing time, and balancing varied demands associated with administration, management of staff, leadership faculty, program development and assessment, student development (and complaints), external demand - not to mention my own teaching and research commitments. I was going to say time...based on the sheer scope of what we're responsible for...everything from approving Pcard purchases to coming up with big-picture strategic plans. It feels like a perpetual losing battle to keep up.
Constant Change & Growth	The amount of change and growth at [the study institution] without corresponding changes/growth in resources. It is difficult to support faculty in their research when I can't support enough travel funding, difficult to support non-tenure-line faculty in staying current pedagogically when I can't support any travel funding for them at all. It is difficult to offer enough sections of general education courses in my dept when I do not have enough faculty members to teach them. At some point we have to finish growing and instead focus on excellence and retaining what we currently have.
Lack of Resources	Lack of resources. We simply do not have enough faculty/staff to keep up with the expectations of delivering a quality education to students under tremendous growth. Resources are insufficient to achieve the strategic goals set by the university. It's unrealistic to expect that we will achieve the president's goals of inclusiveness, diversity, and student success within our current budgets without a massive loss of research productivity. The number of faculty and staff is inadequate. Departments are struggling to keep up and I feel that we have reached a point where we will start to slide down if we don't stop increasing enrollment and start focus on quality.

Five primary challenges emerged: overwhelming administration, lack of time for academic affairs, changing leadership environment, insufficient resources, and personnel issues. Each represents a distinct policy domain requiring institutional attention. Key issues

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included overwhelming administration and meetings of little value, suggesting the need for institutional process audits to eliminate low-value activities and streamline administrative requirements. Chairs had no time for academic strategic planning, program development, assessment, or student development. Chairs struggled with managing but not leading: "*I am a paper-pushing manager rather than an academic leader*," *"… based on the sheer scope of what we're responsible for … it feels like a perpetual losing battle to keep up*." These quotes illustrate a fundamental misalignment between institutional expectations for strategic leadership and the reality of administrative burden—a policy failure requiring systematic intervention.

Chairs voiced challenges with change and growth, faculty hostility towards administrators, uncertainty about who makes decisions, and chairs being left out of key decision-making. This pattern reveals governance and communication failures that institutional leaders can address through explicit policies clarifying decision authority and ensuring chair participation in strategic planning. Chairs noted: "*we simply do not have enough faculty/staff to keep up with the expectations of delivering a quality education to students under tremendous growth*." This resource gap indicates that enrollment growth policies are not matched by corresponding investment in departmental infrastructure—a misalignment requiring correction at budget allocation and strategic planning levels.

Department Size and Challenge Patterns

Mixed methods analyses revealed systematic variation in chair challenges by department size, with direct implications for institutional policy design. Challenges of "*overwhelming administrivia*" and "*lack of time*" were more severe as departmental size increased. This finding provides empirical evidence that workload allocation policies and course release time should be calibrated to department size, not treated as uniform across all chairs. Specifically, chairs of large departments (40+ faculty) face fundamentally different administrative demands than chairs of small departments (≤20 faculty), yet most institutions apply identical expectations and support structures across all unit sizes.

Medium-sized units had higher personnel yet lower resource challenges (Table 2). Medium-sized unit chairs reported more than twice as many personnel issues (53.6%) compared with small (24.6%) or large (21.80%) department chairs. This non-linear pattern has important implications for human resource policies and professional development investment. Medium-sized departments appear to require enhanced training and support specifically for conflict management and personnel issues, while small and large departments require additional budgetary resources and staffing support. A one-size-fits-all approach to leadership development fails to address these differentiated needs. Conversely, small (44.4%) and large (39.5%) unit chairs were more likely to report a lack of resources compared with medium-sized unit chairs (16.10%). This suggests that institutional budget allocation models should account for economies of scale challenges in both small units (which may lack critical mass) and large units (which face scaling demands that outpace resource growth). Medium-sized units may achieve optimal resource-to-demand ratios under current funding models, while small and large units require targeted resource adjustments.

The finding that administrative burden increases with department size has direct implications for administrative staffing policies. Institutions should consider implementing

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differentiated administrative support models including full-time dedicated administrative managers for departments with 40+ faculty, shared administrative coordinator positions for small departments (≤20 faculty), scaled course release policies, and professional staff support budgets proportional to faculty size.

Table 2.
Biggest challenges by department size

Biggest challenges	Small	Medium	Large	Total
Lack of time	14.8%	32.4%	52.8%	100%
Overwhelming administrivia	21.4%	31.1%	47.5%	100%
Personnel issues	24.6%	53.6%	21.8%	100%
Lack of resources	44.4%	16.1%	39.5%	100%
Make sure faculty are supported	-	45.0%	55.0%	100%
Meeting of little values	57.9%	42.1%	-	100%
Amount of changes and growth	-	29.0%	71.0%	100%
Faculty hostile towards administrators	-	45.0%	55.0%	100%
New to the role – Don't know what I don't know	36.0%	-	64.0%	100%
Uncertain about who makes which decisions	57.9%	42.1%	-	100%
Lack of administrative support	-	62.1%	37.9%	100%

Professional Development Preferences and Resource Allocation Decisions

The most interesting topic was managing conflicts (43%), and the most preferred training format was 2-3 days retreat (36%) (Table 3). This preference for intensive, immersive professional development over fragmented workshop sessions has important implications for how institutions invest in leadership development.

Over one-third of chairs (35.7%) selected "other" as an interesting topic, indicating administrative support is far more important than any training, as chairs felt no time for training or no time to implement what they learned. This finding represents a critical challenge to conventional human resource development approaches in higher education. It suggests that institutional investment should prioritize structural solutions—such as hiring dedicated administrative staff, streamlining business processes, and reducing bureaucratic requirements—over additional professional development programming. The implication is that organizational redesign may be more cost-effective than training in addressing chair effectiveness. Chairs commented:

> All of these topics have been offered and are helpful, but I don't think this is what we need right now. We need ways to cope with constant growth and change… The problem is finding the time to implement what you learn at these programs …

This comment reveals a fundamental tension in institutional growth strategies: expanding enrollment without expanding administrative infrastructure creates unsustainable workloads that cannot be solved through individual skill development alone.

> I don't have time to even consider A [adjusting chair role], D [work-life balance] and B [managing conflict], C [building a trusting work environment] happens, but

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> it's not the most time demanding issue. It's the sheer amount and variety of topics to be handled on a daily basis. No time left for strategic thinking.
>
> … I believe we have already received all the training. The sheer amount of bureaucracy and administriva to handle on a daily basis kills any possibility of strategic thinking.

These quotes underscore that the primary barrier to chair effectiveness is not knowledge or skill deficit but systemic administrative overload. Policy interventions should therefore focus on reducing burden rather than enhancing individual capacity.

Table 3.
Most interested topics and preferred training format among chairs and directors

Most Interested Topics	Percentage
Adjust chair role	14.3%
Manage conflict	42.9%
Build trust environment	7.1%
Others	35.7%
Total	100%
Most Preferred Training Format	
Webcourses	17.9%
Live Workshops	7.1%
2-3 Days Retreat	35.7%
Monthly Chair Circle	10.7%
Others	28.6%
Total	100%

Recommended Strategies: Translating Chair Experiences into Policy Levers

Four potential solution areas were identified from the phone interviews: business process review and reduction, professional staff investment and advancement, institutional model innovation, and diversified hiring models. Institutions should conduct systematic audits of administrative requirements imposed on chairs, with authority to eliminate redundant processes, develop career ladders for administrative staff in academic units with competitive salary structures, implement alternative staffing models including non-tenure-track instructors for teaching-intensive courses, and create formal policies governing the optimal mix of tenure-track and non-tenure-track positions by department type and size.

Other suggestions include re-defined chair roles and transitions, new chair policies (with term limits) or alternative chair models (10-month vs. 12-month appointment), and building a trusting environment to reduce faculty-administrator tension. These recommendations point to the need for comprehensive policy review of chair appointment structures.

Discussion

This study identified five biggest challenges: overwhelming administrative issues, lack of time, changing university leadership, lack of resources, and personnel issues. Critically, these

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challenges are not simply individual frustrations but symptoms of systemic policy failures in how institutions design and support chair roles. Mixed methods analyses showed the challenges of *overwhelming administrivia* and *lack of time* increased as departmental size grew.

Current evidence that chairs experience escalating administrative demands and persistent time pressure is consistent with earlier research identifying stress, role conflict, and work–life strain as defining features of the chair role (Gmelch & Burns, 1993). While prior studies have documented high stress levels and competing expectations, current mixed-methods analyses show that perceived administrative load and time pressure systematically increase with department size, offering a more fine-grained account of how structural characteristics shape chair experiences. This empirical evidence demonstrates that current workload models, which typically apply uniform expectations across all department sizes, are fundamentally misaligned with operational realities. Institutions must move toward differentiated policies that recognize and accommodate the scaling effects of department size.

Chairs' preference for structural support over training challenges conventional assumptions about professional development as the primary solution to chair effectiveness. Chairs are signaling that organizational redesign and structural support are more critical than skill development—a message with profound implications for how institutions allocate resources intended to support leadership.

Scaling Administrative Burden: Evidence for Differentiated Workload Policies

Department chairs are tasked with building department cultures, managing course delivery, evaluating faculty performance, supporting professional development, assisting with recruiting and retaining faculty, and planning and monitoring budgets (Gaubatz & Ensminger, 2017; Gmelch, 2015; Miller et al., 2016). The scope of these responsibilities has expanded significantly in recent decades, yet institutional policies regarding course release, administrative support staffing, and compensation have not adjusted proportionally.

The current study shows these were bigger challenges for academic leaders in large departments compared to smaller departments. The negative effects of perceived work pressure on decision-making quality among department heads found by Al-Zoubi et al. (2024) help explain why participants in the current study described difficulty engaging in longer-range planning and people-focused leadership when day-to-day administrative tasks consumed most of their time. Kruse's (2022) analysis of the demands and tensions of department chair leadership highlights the difficulty of balancing managerial tasks with academic and relational work, a tension that appears particularly acute in the current study's larger departments.

Evidence from this study suggests that large departments (40+ faculty) should receive greater course release to account for the expanded scope of administrative responsibilities, should be allocated dedicated full-time administrative manager positions rather than shared support staff, and should have evaluation criteria adjusted based on department size, recognizing that administrative demands in large units may constrain research productivity expectations. While some institutions have begun implementing differentiated workload policies based on department characteristics (Miami University, 2024; Tennessee State University, n.d.), these policies often lack empirical grounding. Current findings provide

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evidence to inform more precise scaling of course releases, administrative support, and performance expectations aligned with unit size and complexity.

The current study is among the first to use mixed methods data analyses to show empirical evidence that the severity of administrative burden and time pressure increased as unit size increased. This provides a foundation for evidence-based policy making regarding administrative support allocations and workload expectations.

Non-Linear Patterns: Tailoring Support by Department Size

Medium-sized unit chairs reported more than twice as many personnel issues (53.6%) compared with small (24.6%) or large (21.80%) department chairs. Conversely, small (44.4%) and large (39.5%) unit chairs were more likely to report lack of resources compared with medium-sized unit chairs (16.10%). Current results extend Pfeffer and Moore's (1980) findings by demonstrating a direct association between department size and perceived administrivia and time pressure, indicating that chairs of larger units not only face more complex politics but also heavier routine workload. This finding has immediate policy implications: leadership development investments should be targeted differently by department size, with medium-sized units receiving enhanced training and support in conflict resolution and personnel management, while small and large units receive enhanced budget flexibility and administrative staffing support. This differentiated approach would maximize return on institutional investment by matching interventions to empirically demonstrated needs. Institutions that continue to apply uniform policies across departments of vastly different sizes are systematically disadvantaging both their chairs and their departments. Evidence-based management requires developing differentiated policy frameworks that account for organizational heterogeneity.

From a policy perspective, this means conducting institutional audits of current administrative support distributions relative to department size to identify systematic inequities, developing formulas for course release and staff support that scale appropriately with faculty and student numbers, creating size-differentiated expectations for chairs' research productivity and service contributions in annual evaluations, and establishing different appointment models (e.g., 10-month vs 12-month appointments) based on unit needs and workload realities.

Resource Gaps and Growth Strategy Misalignment

These resource gaps point to a fundamental tension in institutional strategy: growth-oriented enrollment policies that are not matched by proportional investment in faculty lines and operational budgets create unsustainable pressures on departments and their leaders. This has implications for state and system-level funding policies, which often incentivize enrollment growth without providing corresponding increases in per-student funding. Policymakers at state and system levels should consider funding formula reforms that account for the infrastructure costs of growth, not merely direct instructional costs.

The study institution experienced change and growth. This is a pattern common among public research universities responding to state pressure to increase access while facing constrained budgets. The implications extend beyond individual institutions to state higher education policy: funding formulas should account for the administrative infrastructure costs associated with growth and should include metrics for administrative

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capacity, not simply per-student instructional expenditures. Without such adjustments, states are effectively creating unfunded mandates that undermine institutional quality and leadership sustainability.

Conflict Management and Leadership Development Policy

Managing conflict was the most interesting topic among academic leaders. Institutions should prioritize onboarding and early-career support. Many academic leaders have reported feeling ill-prepared in employee management due to lack of training (Morris & Laipple, 2015). The fact that 97% of chairs receive no formal training before assuming their roles represents a massive institutional failure in human capital development. This should be addressed through institutional policy requiring pre-appointment leadership preparation programs.

This creates a unique challenge absent in traditional management roles: chairs must manage personnel while maintaining collegial relationships with those they manage and whom they will rejoin as peers. A recent review identifies personnel management as the most contentious yet decisive area of university departmental leadership (Álvarez-Álvarez, 2025), reinforcing our participants' reports that managing staff performance, conflict, and hiring is a major source of strain. Institutional policies should acknowledge this complexity by providing third-party mediation services for departmental conflicts to reduce the burden on chairs to resolve disputes personally, and clear policies protecting chairs from retaliation or damaged collegial relationships when they return to faculty roles.

The pattern of early departure from chair roles represents a loss of institutional knowledge and leadership capacity with significant organizational costs. From a succession planning perspective, institutions should develop policies that establish term limits for chairs (e.g., maximum 10 years) to prevent burnout while enabling reasonable continuity, create structured transition and knowledge transfer processes including overlap periods between outgoing and incoming chairs, and develop leadership pipelines through associate chair or assistant chair roles that prepare future leaders.

Professional Development Delivery Models and Resource Allocation

The current study found that the most preferred training format was a two to three-day retreat. This preference has resource allocation implications: institutions may achieve better outcomes by investing in fewer, more intensive development experiences rather than frequent brief workshops. Existing studies report that only 3% of new academic leaders received training (Gaubatz & Ensminger, 2017; Gmelch, 2015). This statistic represents a profound gap in organizational investment and should prompt policy review at multiple levels, including requiring pre-appointment leadership preparation for all chairs, and developing shared leadership development resources across institutions within a state system to achieve economies of scale.

This creates a perverse pattern where chairs facing the most complex management challenges are least likely to receive preparation. Institutions should prioritize leadership development resources for chairs of large departments. However, the current study reveals that chairs themselves prioritize structural support over training. Institutional policies should therefore mandate transition support that includes both skill development and organizational scaffolding, suggesting institutions are effectively outsourcing leadership

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development to external programs and individual initiative rather than building internal capacity. A more sustainable policy approach would involve creating systematic internal development systems that capture and transfer institutional knowledge.

From a talent management perspective, the failure to invest in chair development represents a lost opportunity to build a pipeline of experienced academic administrators capable of advancing to dean and provost roles. System-level policies should consider leadership development as strategic infrastructure investment, not discretionary expenditure.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that uniform policies for department chair roles across units of vastly different sizes create a fundamental misalignment between institutional policy and operational realities. The empirical evidence reveals that administrative burden and resource needs scale with department size in non-linear, complex ways that demand differentiated policy responses.

First, workload allocation policies must be fundamentally redesigned to account for department size. Current practices of offering uniform course release or administrative support across all chairs systematically disadvantage leaders of large departments while potentially over-resourcing small departments. Evidence-based policies would calibrate course release, administrative staff support, and research productivity expectations to the scale and complexity of the unit being led.

Second, professional development investments should be strategically targeted based on empirical patterns of need rather than one-size-fits-all programming. Medium-sized departments require enhanced conflict resolution and personnel management training, while small and large departments benefit more from structural support such as budget augmentation and administrative staffing. Chairs' preference for structural solutions over additional training suggests organizational redesign may be more critical than skill development for improving chair effectiveness.

Third, institutional growth strategies must be accompanied by corresponding investments in administrative infrastructure at both institutional and state policy levels. Expanding enrollments without proportional growth in faculty lines, professional staff support, and departmental budgets creates unsustainable workloads that cannot be addressed through individual efficiency or skill development. Funding formulas should include metrics for administrative capacity, not simply per-student instructional costs.

Finally, the concentration of new chairs (75% in their first term) combined with high rates of early departure signals that current models are unsustainable. Institutions should establish term limits (e.g., 10 years maximum) to prevent burnout, create formal succession planning systems, develop associate chair positions to build leadership pipelines, and implement phased transitions back to faculty roles. Without such structural reforms, institutions will continue to lose experienced leaders and institutional knowledge.

The one-size-fits-all model of academic leadership is demonstrably inadequate. Institutions must develop differentiated, data-driven policies that recognize the heterogeneity of department chairs' roles and calibrate support systems accordingly. This study demonstrates that administrative burden and time pressure systematically increase

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with department size, yet most institutions apply uniform expectations across all units. Without policy reform, the cost of inaction - chair burnout, leadership turnover, and lost institutional knowledge - will continue to undermine strategic goals. The policy imperative is clear: abandon one-size-fits-all approaches, invest in differentiated support calibrated to department size, prioritize structural solutions over individual development, and align growth strategies with administrative capacity building. Implementation is now the challenge for higher education leadership.

Limitations

The study achieved a 42% response rate, good-to-excellent for online surveys of academic administrators (Fincham, 2008; Shih & Fan, 2009), particularly given chairs' limited time and competing demands. Nonetheless, findings may not fully represent all chairs and directors' perspectives. Policy recommendations are most directly applicable to large, research-intensive public universities experiencing growth pressures. However, the core principle - that department size should inform differentiated policy approaches - likely has broader applicability across institutional types. While these data derive from a single U.S. public research university, the drivers of administrative overload we document—massified enrolments, intensified accountability, and proliferating institutional initiatives—are widely reported internationally (Challen, 2020). Consequently, the principles we propose for differentiating chair workload and administrative support by department size and growth trajectory are likely relevant for large public universities and other multi-faculty institutions in diverse national contexts (Challen, 2020).

Study data showed that 25% of chairs were female. Although this ratio was equivalent to the overall university chairs and directors' demographics, indicating women leaders were under-represented in academic leadership. This demographic pattern has equity implications for leadership development policy. If women are systematically underrepresented in chair roles, they have less access to the career pathways that lead to senior administrative positions, perpetuating gender inequities in academic leadership.

Strengths and Contributions

This study used online survey and phone interviews to gather rich qualitative data. A mixed methods study design provided an overall understanding of key issues, and an opportunity explore the magnitude, depth, and context of these challenges with recommended solutions. Importantly, this study bridges the gap between descriptive research on chair challenges and actionable policy recommendations by explicitly linking empirical findings to specific institutional policy levers and management practices.

By linking survey measures of administrivia and time pressure to structural characteristics and combining these with qualitative accounts of how chairs allocate time, this study offers a rare empirical basis for differentiating chair workload policies. This addresses a gap in the higher education policy literature, where university-level workload guidelines often appear in grey literature or institutional documents without empirical grounding. Our findings on administrative overload among department chairs complement a recent Vietnamese study showing that lecturer workload negatively predicts performance

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by demonstrating how poorly calibrated leadership workloads can undermine academic leaders to support staff performance and institutional priorities (Hanh, 2023). By applying a mixed-methods, unit-level approach to chairs' administrative workload, this study contributes evidence for more equitable and sustainable leadership roles in large public universities – a methodological and substantive contribution to evidence-based policy making in higher education.

Future studies are encouraged to identify and compare challenges among academic leaders in different types of institutions with tailored solutions. Additionally, policy-focused research should examine cost-benefit analyses of different administrative support models by department size, longitudinal studies tracking chair retention, effectiveness, and career progression under different policy frameworks, and research on optimal staffing ratios and how they vary by discipline, institutional type, and department mission. From a policy perspective, research should also investigate whether current support systems differentially serve chairs from underrepresented groups.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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Human Participants

This study received exempt status from the University of Central Florida Institutional Review Board (IRB). Informed consent was obtained from all participants.

Originality Note

This study provides original mixed-methods evidence on how administrative overload, workload demands, and institutional changes shape the leadership experiences of department chairs and school directors in a large public research university. Findings inform evidence-based strategies for leadership development and institutional support to sustain academic leaders in complex higher education environments.

Use of Generative AI/ AI-assisted Technologies Statement

The author used [Claude Sonnet 4.5 (Anthropic, January 2026)] to assist with manuscript revision, including author-confirmed literature integration, structural condensation to meet word limits, policy framing consistency, and APA formatting. All AI suggestions were critically reviewed and substantially revised by the author. The author retains full responsibility for all content, interpretations, and conclusions. AI was not used for data collection, analysis, or interpretation.

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