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Faculty

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Can a Historian Lead Berkeley's Anthropologists? Department Is Split Over an Interim Chair

By Christopher Shea

The anthropology department at the University of California at Berkeley has long been an esteemed center of scholarship, if also a contentious place. Next year it's going to be run by a historian.

The decision to appoint an interim chair from outside the department has angered several of the department's most senior and respected members, who describe the move as an affront to departmental self-governance—and a slight to them personally.

The move, however, also has strong support within the department, reflecting a generational rift, or at least a generational shift in power.

Mary Elizabeth Berry, a former chair of the history department and a Japan specialist, will serve as interim chair of anthropology next year while Cori Hayden, an associate professor of anthropology, finishes a book on the emergence of generic drugs in Mexico. Ms. Hayden is slated to take over as chair in the fall of 2014.

The decision to appoint Ms. Berry was made by Carla Hesse, dean of the social-sciences division of Berkeley's College of Letters & Science.

In a brief interview, Ms. Hesse described the arrangement as entirely routine. Ideally, she said, she would have chosen a former anthropology chair to take over for a year while the best choice for

chair, Ms. Hayden, finished the book, but the professors she approached who had that credential weren't able to take on the duty, for various reasons.

Nonetheless, three of the most well-known anthropologists in the department took umbrage at the decision, about which they were not consulted and which was announced in an e-mail sent out by the departmental manager as the semester was winding down.

'Kind of a Shock'

"The way it was done and what was done was unprecedented and kind of a shock," said Paul M. Rabinow, a professor in the department. "This is another big step in the disenfranchisement of the faculty in general, and it's part of a general change in the regime of how this public university is being governed."

In particular, said Mr. Rabinow, who is the author of such books as *Marking Time: On the Anthropology of the Contemporary* (Princeton University Press, 2007) and *French DNA: Trouble in Purgatory* (University of Chicago Press, 1999), the appointment represented "a strong statement on the part of the administration" that the department's senior members were "not considered to be reliable stewards of our affairs."

His concerns were shared by Nancy Scheper-Hughes and Laura Nader, who, at 82, is the longest-serving member of the department. Last March her 50 years of work at Berkeley were feted at a symposium titled "Anthropology in the World." (Ms. Scheper-Hughes and Mr. Rabinow are both in their late 60s.)

Ms. Nader stressed that her complaints had little to do with the people who were appointed. "It's about departmental independence and democratic governance," she said, although she expressed disappointment at younger colleagues who were content to go along with the administrative plan.

She and the other critics of the decision said Stanley H. Brandes,

another senior cultural anthropologist and a past chair, would have been a sensible choice for a home-grown interim chair. Mr. Brandes could not be reached for comment.

Most members of the department appear to be unmoved by the arguments of the senior cultural anthropologists. "I find it to be a petty academic quibble to think that a department name difference should matter in the choice of this one-year interim chair," wrote Terrence Deacon, the current chair of the department, in an e-mail, "particularly given the intellectual overlaps involved in this case." He was referring to Ms. Berry's writings on culture in early modern Japan and her authorship of such books as *The Culture of Civil War in Kyoto* (University of California Press, 1994).

Lawrence Cohen, a cultural anthropologist, echoed that position and added that tight budgets and significant responsibilities among the department's members limited the pool of possible chairs. "So," he wrote in an e-mail, "for a year we have someone from a much larger department helping."

Nor is every member of the senior generation in agreement with the dissenters. Nelson H. Graburn, a professor emeritus, said that he strongly supported Ms. Hayden and that Ms. Berry struck him as "very straightforward and on the level."

The Dean's Role

At Berkeley, deans have the authority to appoint department chairs. That is done in consultation with the faculty members, but because anthropology is unusually factionalized—with archaeologists and cultural anthropologists essentially running parallel operations within the department, for instance—administrators have for years played an outsize role in such appointments. In more-homogenous departments, professors present their own candidates for ratification. Administrators have selected the three anthropology chairs preceding Ms. Berry, after soliciting nominations, Berkeley professors said, but this is the first time they've gone outside the

department.

Ms. Hayden, the anthropologist who will become chair in 2014, declined to comment, and Ms. Berry, the historian set to run the department starting in the fall, sent an e-mail saying she looked forward to serving the interests of the "luminous department."

The critics aired their concerns at a meeting with Dean Hesse last week. They have gone so far as to use the word "receivership" to describe the situation, a hot-button term typically deployed when administrators bring in outside leadership to rebuild basket-case departments. Ms. Hesse and most professors in the department completely reject that characterization, but critics of the appointment see a slippery slope. Ms. Nader asks, "Can a nonanthropologist represent anthropological interests to the administration?"

Berkeley was rated third among graduate anthropology departments in 1995 by the National Research Council and highly—if not quite that highly—in the more-opaque 2010 rankings, with the decline possibly due to a number of early retirements.

In recent years, Berkeley anthropologists have been active in protests over rising tuition, and last year they assisted with a student occupation of the anthropology library, successfully fending off cuts in the library's hours. Ms. Scheper-Hughes sees the chair decision as of a piece with a host of unwelcome developments at Berkeley. "This is what neoliberal is—nontransparency, 'top down' rather than 'bottom up,' and deciding that consensus is what the dean decides it is," she said.

She looks back to a time when department members would have fierce intellectual debates and yet present a united front to the administration. "When you saw things happen, like a hire, that perhaps you wished didn't happen, everyone felt a little burned, but you came back in the fall and literally everyone had their arms

around people's backs," she said. "That kind of sociability seems to be destroyed."

Tim D. White, a paleoanthropologist who moved his lab to the department of integrative biology in 1995, along with other biological anthropologists, argued that this notion of a golden era of rough comity "is a historical fiction." In his view, after all, his own subfield was disowned by the department.

Jonathan Marks, an anthropologist at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte who spent three years at Berkeley, said that tension is a productive part of the DNA of Berkeley anthropology. "There are a lot of very brilliant people, and it's kind of sad that they can't all get along," he said. "But if they ever did, they might lose the magic that is that department."

Comments

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greg333 5 days ago

This is what neoliberal is: managing smug, petty, and vicious warriors in trench warfare over what constitutes knowledge? I have to say as a "culturalist" myself that nothing is more embarrassing than the treatment of biological anthropology by most (though thankfully not all) "arts" faculty.

7 people liked this.

LIKE

REPLY



schultzjc 5 days ago in reply to greg333

I'm not sure what a "neoliberal" is, or why it matters here, but if I guess correctly, I'm pretty sure that term cannot be applied to any of the people involved in this situation.

10 people liked this.



badger74 4 days ago in reply to schultzjc

After reading the article and responses all I can say is, these folks think they should run the university too?? No wonder many universities are in such terrible shape. What passes for shared governance is really some form of dysfunctional insanity. They make the US Congress look like a well oiled machine.

4 people liked this.



busyslinky 5 days ago

When a Dean assigns an interim department head from another department the signal it sends to those that do not know the details is that the department is dysfunctional.

They didn't say this outright, and maybe not the message the Dean wanted to send, but this is the message sent to the outside world. So, I agree with the upset professors, they had a number of choices. "Most" of the faculty do not feel the characterization of the department as a "basket case", furthering signalling that some of the faculty tend to believe it is.

So, my overall impression is, yes, it is a basket case and dysfunctional department.

19 people liked this.



JD Eveland 4 days ago in reply to busyslinky

If it wasn't seen as such before, the reactions of the senior culturalists will certainly have amplified the signal of dysfunctionality to positively orchestral levels. If they were really the slightest bit interested in rebuilding a unified and functional department capable of climbing out of the basket, they would have embraced the decision to appoint a relative outsider to the chair as a way to cool things down and lay a basis for internal reconciliation with the help of someone who doesn't have a pony in the ring. Instead, their petulant reaction has poisoned the waters in which the new chair will have to swim for a year and the new chair will have to take up residence down the road. (Sorry for the excessive number of animal metaphors here - something in this case must have stimulated me to think along those lines.)

3 people liked this.



tapir33 5 days ago

The only thing the Anthropology Department should come together for is presenting "a united front to the administration"? What about managing their own internal affairs effectively and responsibly, even as they engage in vigorous intellectual debate? What about keeping the narcissism of its members sufficiently under control so that the department can operate as a community, not unlike ones that anthropologists themselves have been known to study?

30 people liked this.



11239383 5 days ago

The role of a department chair is so much more than being a scholar. In fact, the good department chair's scholarly career takes a backseat to promoting the careers of his/her faculty colleagues. You are there 24/7/365 to promote the careers of assistant professors as they climb the tenure ladder and for other colleagues at every stage of their respective careers. You are there in their sickness and in their health, for better or worse...although if you are sane for shorter than a lifetime (trust me..15 years was enough). In other words faculty should rejoice if there is a chair who puts them first and fights their battles. And yes, chairs make 80% of the decisions in higher education...many that faculty never know about nor would care to know about.

20 people liked this.



looksioux 5 days ago

The old academic cliché applies here: "we only take such matters so seriously because we know the stakes are so low." For 45 years, I've tried to explain the "academic world" to long time friends who work in business and industry, but their eyes just fog up in humorous disbelief. I continue to be defensive about such matters, and despite our many obvious flaws, I hope academe will not ape the world of "management" any more than we already have.

1 person liked this.



angustias 5 days ago

I bet that every institution of higher education has a department like this: faculty who "take umbrage" easily and often, demean their colleagues' research as trivial, and create factions that force new hires to take sides, leading to the departure (even in this job market) after one or two years of said new hires. And should a Dean dare to appoint faculty from another department to oversee the search committee to replace those fleeing new hires, THEN the factions come together squealing about governance and academic freedom.

I do not like Dean-appointed chairs, but in my institution we have lived with a department whose long-term dysfunction our conflict-avoidance Dean refuses to address. Constant nasty departmental sniping can suck the life out of a place, creating a miasma of unease.

From the hallowed halls of Berkeley to my SLAC - if this does NOT sound familiar, you are in academic Nirvana.

13 people liked this.

LIKE

REPLY



schultzjc 5 days ago

So, no one in the dept would take the job, then they complained when someone else was appointed? My goodness, old fart academics are a tiresome lot.

39 people liked this.

LIKE

REPLY



munibond 5 days ago

These are the very same people who have refused to step up and DO SOMETHING to help rid their own department of dysfunction. It seems it is always someone else's responsibility.

Notice too that Berkeley did NOT keep the current chair on for an added year as the interim. (I believe there was a pronounced lack of support for that idea from the same people who are speaking up in "upset" now).

Perhaps it is time to disband the department and send the cultural folks over to sociology and lit studies and the archeological folks to an archeology dept. That would put them all out of their self proclaimed collective misery.

16 people liked this.

LIKE

REPLY



11182967 5 days ago

I'm wondering about Ms. Berry's credentials as a historian--even a cursory sense of the history of anthropology as an academic profession should be enough to scare off any sensible person from outside the tribe(s).

1 person liked this.

LIKE

REPLY



draybeck 5 days ago

A pity that this had to become so prominent an issue in the Department that first housed Alfred Louis Kroeber, the dean of American anthropology, and a host of other luminaries. There is likely much roiling below the surface and a good part of the conflicts may reflect the ongoing a very nasty disputes between the post-modernists and those with a more empirical orientation. The difficulties are probably not simply those of the department, but those of the discipline. That sort of nonsense led me to resign from the American Anthropological Association, one of the greatest offenders.

5 people liked this.



dbsplatapus 5 days ago

The wisdom of letting Professor Hayden complete his/her book prior to taking what is clearly a time consuming and challenging administrative burden is clear. Kudos to all involved with this decision.

I respectfully disagree with busyslinky. Many with horrid memories and deep battle scars from taking administrative roles as an Assoc. Professor may view the Dean's actions as laudable.

I agree wholeheartedly that when colleagues cannot break out of their navel gazing to take effective communal action, appointing an outside chair (even if only interim) is a sign of a dysfunctional department. But this characterization fits best when there is no long term plan in place. That is the case in my current department, a basket case of the highest order, but does not apply to Berkeley's Anthropology Department.

4 people liked this.



panacea 5 days ago

This really seems much ado about nothing. No one in the department was willing to step up, and it's only for one flipping year.

My division (Health Sciences) is lead by an office technologist with no experience in health care. It took her awhile to understand our culture and our needs, but she's turned into our biggest advocate on campus.

Either step up or shut up. They had a chance to take on the role, and didn't. What are these guys complaining about, again?

12 people liked this.



sand6432 4 days ago

Must have been a slow news day at The Chronicle for this interim appointment to be considered deserving of anything more than a brief mention. Hard to imagine that anyone outside the department really cares about this.---Sandy Thatcher



jffoster 4 days ago in reply to sand6432

Actually, the whole field cares about this, though since it appears temporary, probably not as much as we cared about the Stanford split and subsequent dis-split. It is in a microcosm in significant part a reflection of what has happened to and in Anthropology as a whole.

1 person liked this.



aloofbooks 4 days ago

This is nothing new. When I was a graduate student I remember a professor in my department who was chosen by the then dean to be chair of another department for two years.



nfmorg 4 days ago

I have no information on this matter but, because I'm an anthropologist and can't help myself, I find it very interesting. By the way, the Berkeley department has more tenured or tenure track faculty now than it did in 1995. http://www.mla.org/acad_work_d... Were recent chairs responsible for this? We could find out, and then praise one or another of the factions, or blame them, after explaining what this trend really means. It's our responsibility, really.
Alan Trevithick



academentia 3 days ago

I've seen this movie. The department may unify somewhat in order to resist the outsider who may be seeking a feather in her cap for mediating a dysfunctional department. In our case, the temp--ever despised thereafter in a new position in the administration--won the feather. The department united to prevent the temp for taking credit where credit was not due, which meant full time work rewriting documents that were shiftily edited and submitted to be passed but which faculty caught and changed causing numerous resubmissions. The upshot: clear proof of administrative interference in departmental matters, collusion of faculty, and not much more. Although the department has moved on, resentment toward the administration is strong, but perhaps not much more than that of the faculty members of other departments.



panacea 3 days ago in reply to academentia

No offense, but sounds to me like the temp earned her feather, and your department created unnecessary work for itself in a futile attempt to undermine the temp.

Hmm. Sounds a lot lot our current situation in government.

1 person liked this.



munibond 3 days ago

Not meaning to push an old egg but in what way was the outgoing chair actually an anthropologist? His degree was in biological anthropology (which Berkeley pushed over to the integrative biology department) and he has done next to NO work in anthropology itself focusing instead on "naturalist philosophy." So it seems that the department is going from being led by an outsider to being led by an outsider. But then again this being anthropology, the prior chair has a degree which includes anthropology in its name (though at Berkeley it would be a different department) and he was chair for eight years -- so the label perhaps makes him an anthropologist?



academentia 2 days ago in reply to munibond

There's probably too much we don't know here to make a truly useful comment.

1 person liked this.



arianna23 2 days ago

The departure of a group of biological anthropologists from the four-field department is not surprising, since they could only get the university to supply lab space elsewhere on campus at the time. It has been normal practice on many campuses to send votes for chair candidates to the dean who does the counting. There has from time to time been training of chairs,.Perhaps chairs need to be advised now to create more internal communication through group lunches, frequent faculty meetings and open doors, in the era when email and facebook have encouraged fractionation. Would be a good anthropological topic of study.



chebdon 1 day ago

As a recent graduate of the Berkeley anthropology department, I would add that the idea of "receivership" is a realistic one in the wider context, e.g. budget cuts, privatization, sidelining of humanities and social sciences, etc.. Berkeley has been getting corporatized and faculty governance has been getting kicked to the side intensely over the past decade. The anthropologists, to say the least, have been the most consistent institutional dissenters during this time. In that way they have been anything but "factionalized" and "dysfunctional." I think the undemocratic appointment of the interim chair is directly linked to this history. The "emergency" of "dysfunction" is not how the Berkeley

anthropologists are describing themselves, but it is how the administration portrays things. The crisis is rather being created top down, and it seems that faculty such as Rabinow and Nader are objecting to the authoritarian politics. Something similar is happening, for example, in Michigan where the governor and his unelected "emergency managers" are being described as putting cities into receivership. Contrary to what some have said in the comments, the department had Professor Brandes and others who could have been interim chair, but the appointment was made from the outside without transparent consultation. It's punishment, basically, and I think the professors in this article were right to raise the issue. Unlike what Prof. Graburn said in the article, I would note, it's not about Cori Hayden being chair, but about the political process through which the department decides its own directions or not.

1 person liked this.

LIKE

REPLY



munibond 1 day ago in reply to chebdon

when was it ever said that department chair appointments are supposed to be "democratic"? and perhaps there is an unspoken agenda about goals and willingness to commit to them which is not being openly discussed

LIKE

REPLY



JD Eveland 1 day ago in reply to chebdon

I certainly appreciate your insider point of view, but there's a lot left unsaid in your comments here (perhaps for good reasons.) There's a world of possibilities bound up in your summation "...the political process through which the department decides its own directions..." Departments by definition exist with larger structures of colleges and universities, and are always constrained in many ways, most particularly through the budgetary process. There are always some domains that departments and/or chairs largely control (although always subject to review by higher elements of the hierarchy) and others that they have some input into and still others where things are simply done to them. Across seven universities and 30 years, I've seen many different variations on these patterns, ranging from complete authoritarian control by the President to a largely self-directed professoriat loosely coordinated through occasional meetings called by a chair who basically signed anything put before him. All these arrangements worked, more or less well, under conditions of stability; none of them were very effective at dealing with changed environments.

The operative questions left unanswered in your post are just how much power does the chair really have in your department, and what do you expect her to do in the year that she's interim that would not be done by someone appointed from within the department. Have there been other interim chairs in the past, and how were they selected? Rightly or wrongly, your department has a reputation to the outside world of internal fracture and less than completely collegial interactions. Would it have been possible to muster complete consensus support for any internal candidate? And what would a chair selected from within the department, either by appointment or election, do differently than what you expect from the "outside" (departmentally, but obviously sharing many of your field's values and procedures) chair?

Unless there are some substantive differences that you can identify (and there very well

may be - I'm not presuming one way or another), then the whole controversy sounds a lot more like a bunch of hurt feelings aired in public, which doesn't make anyone look particularly good.

2 people liked this.

LIKE

REPLY