

THE STRATEGIC ROLE OF SOCIAL NETWORKS IN ACADEMIC LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT

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Abstract

University leaders navigate a complex and dynamic environment, balancing the diverse expectations of students, faculty, policy makers, and governmental bodies. Proficiency in these roles requires deep academic understanding, contextual knowledge, and effective management and leadership skills. This study explored how faculty members serving as department chairs developed their leadership capacity when entering the role. The investigation utilized social network theory and a leadership development model to examine department chairs' experiences at a Canadian research-intensive university. It employed a qualitative research approach combining constructivist philosophy, case study design, and inductive research techniques. Drawing on the key themes of role entry, role understanding, and skill development, the study found that social networks played a central role in the participants' leadership development. Post-secondary institutions may consider supporting leadership networks and providing equitable access to learning opportunities to increase academic leadership capacity.

Keywords: leadership development, leadership succession, post-secondary leadership, department chairs, social networks

Résumé

Les personnes occupant des postes de direction en milieu universitaire évoluent dans un environnement complexe et dynamique, cherchant un équilibre entre les diverses attentes des étudiants, des professeurs, des décideurs politiques et des organismes gouvernementaux. La maîtrise de ces rôles nécessite une compréhension approfondie du milieu universitaire, des connaissances contextuelles et des compétences efficaces en matière de gestion et de leadership. Cette étude a exploré comment les membres du corps professoral occupant un poste de directeur ou directrice de département ont développé leur capacité de leadership lorsqu'ils ont accédé à ce rôle. L'enquête a utilisé la théorie des réseaux sociaux et un modèle de développement du leadership pour examiner les expériences des directeurs de département dans une université canadienne à forte intensité de recherche. Elle a utilisé une approche de recherche qualitative combinant philosophie constructiviste, conception d'études de cas et techniques de recherche inductives. S'appuyant sur les thèmes clés de l'entrée dans un rôle, de la compréhension du rôle et du développement des compétences, l'étude a révélé que les réseaux sociaux jouaient un rôle central dans le développement du leadership des participants. Les établissements postsecondaires pourraient envisager de soutenir des réseaux de leadership et un accès équitable aux possibilités d'apprentissage afin d'accroître les capacités en cette matière.

Mots-clés : développement du leadership, relève dans les postes de direction, postes de direction dans les établissements postsecondaires, directeurs de département, réseaux sociaux

Introduction

Effective leadership is essential across all professional settings, particularly within universities operating in a dynamic and complex educational system (Ruben et al., 2021). Uni-

versity leaders' accountabilities have increased significantly over the last century, expanding from Whitehead's (1929) "imaginative acquisition of knowledge" (p. 97) to meeting current demands to maximize economic, social, and environmental impact (Heffernan et al., 2022; Trottier et al.,

2022). Furthermore, disruptors such as the COVID-19 pandemic, globalization, performance metrics, and reductions in public funding and support have heightened the need for solid and adaptable academic leadership.

Despite its importance, the literature on post-secondary leadership, leadership development, adult learning, and management have insufficiently explored the development of university department chairs (Avolio et al., 2010; Esen et al., 2020; Gmelch & Buller, 2015). The research suggests that neglecting the development of these leaders is problematic because they are responsible for up to 80% of all institutional decisions and known as the “least studied and most misunderstood” leadership group in universities (Gmelch & Buller, 2015, p. 4; see also Armstrong & Woloshyn, 2017; Boyko, 2009; Brown & Moshavi, 2002; Cipriano & Riccardi, 2018; Dean et al., 2021; Weaver et al., 2019).

Department chairs are academic staff who hold formal leadership positions in their faculties and have influence over academic policies, strategies, structures, management, and resource allocation. These leaders play a crucial role in supporting their universities’ mandate by serving as the link between senior administration and the students, faculty, and non-academic staff in their areas (Aprile et al., 2021; Black, 2015; Fields et al., 2019; Heffernan et al., 2022; Weaver et al., 2019). They are responsible for steering the activities of their disciplinary units, managing staff, setting academic goals, developing curriculum, and representing the department to the university administration.

Faculty members entering department chair roles are generally recruited from within the academic ranks of their departments because only experienced scholars, rather than professionally trained managers, are believed to have the crucial academic and contextual understanding required for legitimacy and success. A challenge arising from this paradigm is that the competencies leading to success in teaching and research positions differ from those needed in department chair roles, and many enter these positions without prior leadership experience or access to programs that would support their development (Boyko, 2009; Chu, 2021; Dettmar, 2022; Heffernan et al., 2022; Ruben et al., 2021). Potential explanations for this phenomenon include a lack of a qualified candidate pool and a widely held belief that leadership skills are best learned experientially in the role (Davies & Thomas, 2009; Ruben et al., 2021).

This qualitative study aims to explore the leadership development experiences of department chairs at a research-intensive university. The central research question

is: How do faculty members develop their leadership capacity when entering the department chair role?

Theoretical Underpinnings

This study integrates social network theory and Gmelch and Buller’s (2015) leadership development model to examine the participants’ experiences. Social network theory suggests that relationships and interactions between individuals significantly impact behaviour, decision-making, and outcomes in various settings, including academia (Borgatti & Ofem, 2010; Christakis et al., 2010; Heffernan, 2021; Moreno, 1941). It emphasizes the role of social connections in facilitating information flow and access to resources, thereby influencing career decisions, advancement and the diffusion of ideas (Heffernan, 2021). The theory diverges from traditional social science approaches by prioritizing the influence of these networks over individual attributes and by recognizing both the constraints and the opportunities that these networks create (Borgatti & Ofem, 2010). In the context of post-secondary education, networks serve as rich sources of mentorship and collaboration opportunities, which lead to enhanced scholarship profiles, as well as increased visibility and recognition (Aprile et al., 2021; Baker & Bitto, 2021; Christakis et al., 2010; DeLuca et al., 2017; Fields et al., 2019; Heffernan, 2021; Leibowitz et al., 2014; Simmons & Taylor, 2019).

However, concerns have been raised about the potential for networks to perpetuate inequalities in access to information, resources, and career advancement opportunities based on factors such as race, age, and gender (Aprile et al., 2021; Borgatti & Ofem, 2010; Christakis et al., 2010; Heffernan, 2021). Female faculty often report having limited access to networking opportunities and utilizing their networks for social support rather than leveraging them for self-promotion, career enhancement, and employment opportunities (Borgatti & Ofem, 2010; Heffernan, 2021). At Canadian universities, the proportion of women who occupy department chair roles is between 34% and 36%, which is significantly lower than their counterparts in the United States, who are occupying 54% of these roles (Bichsel & McChesney, 2017; Boyko, 2009; Gmelch et al., 2017; Meza-Mejia et al., 2023). This figure may reflect a broader trend in Canada in which women are underrepresented in academic leadership positions, a disparity that is a focus of ongoing research (Acker, 2012; Eaton & Burns, 2020; Lavigne, 2020).

Gmelch and Buller's (2015) leadership development model suggests that leadership capacity among department chairs can be gained by developing a conceptual understanding of the role, developing leadership skills, and engaging in self-reflection. Developing a conceptual understanding of the role involves integrating leadership notions with knowledge of the position within the faculty, university, and larger post-secondary system (Boyko, 2009; Gmelch & Buller, 2015). Developing leadership skills, including self-awareness, working with others, leading change, and achieving results, is crucial for accomplishing the role's responsibilities, including representing the department to administration, maintaining workplace climates, and implementing strategic plans (Boyko, 2009; Gonaim, 2016; Gmelch, 2019; Gmelch & Buller, 2015). Additionally, self-reflection plays a critical role in understanding the position, developing a personal leadership philosophy, and developing contextually appropriate leadership skills (Black, 2015; Bland et al., 2009; Cipriano & Riccardi, 2018; Gmelch, 2019; Gmelch & Buller, 2015; Ruben et al., 2021).

Methods

Research Design

This qualitative case study methodologically integrates a thematic analysis to map the interconnectedness of academic leaders' experiences (Creswell & Creswell, 2017; Merriam, 1998). Through a constructivist lens, the investigator dissected and interpreted the narratives of department chairs, recognizing the strategic role of their social networks and reflective practices in shaping their leadership evolution.

Context

The research was conducted at a comprehensive research university located in western Canada. The university offered 250+ academic programs at the bachelor's, master's, and doctoral levels and was governed by a board, council, and senate. The organizational structure included a president, four vice-presidents, and 14 deans. The associate deans in each faculty oversaw portfolios for undergraduate and graduate education and research, while department chairs led the academic disciplines.

All 49 department chairs at the university were full-time members of an academic bargaining unit. At the time

of this research, they were conducting biennial academic performance reviews for full-time faculty, reviewing tenure and promotion applications, and managing other day-to-day responsibilities. The participants held the highest academic degrees awarded in their fields, had five-year limited-term (renewable once) appointments, and held full-time positions as professors, associate professors, and senior instructors in the faculties of arts, engineering, medicine, science, and veterinary medicine. The majority were male (42/49).

Data Collection

Only participants who occupied department chair roles at the time of the interview, as defined by the institution's academic collective agreement and human resources department, were eligible to take part in the study. Faculty in other chair roles, such as area chairs, research chairs, and institute chairs, were not included. The researcher emailed invitation letters to each eligible participant indicating that no compensation would be offered for their contribution. Semi-structured interviews were conducted between August 15 and November 1, 2019, with the 17 department chairs who agreed to participate in the study. The number of participants was deemed adequate to achieve thematic saturation, the point at which data collection no longer reveals new insights or themes.

Participants received a guide with questions and a consent form before the interviews took place. The interviews explored motivation, learning about accountabilities, skill development, and self-reflection. Additional open-ended questions were asked to explore themes emerging from the participants' experiences. Interviews were conducted in person or via teleconference, lasting 45–65 minutes. They were recorded and transcribed by a university-approved vendor. Personally identifiable information was removed during transcription, and pseudonyms were used instead to match participants' records with their answers.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis and constant comparative methods were employed to collect, code, and analyze the data, drawing upon the work of Braun and Clarke (2022) and Merriam and Tisdell (2015). The constant comparative method enabled the comparison of different data segments, revealing repeated patterns of experiences that were both similar and different among the participants. Consequently, the

researcher deductively organized clustered codes into the broad themes of role entry and understanding, skill development, and self-reflection outlined in Gmelch and Buller's (2015) leadership development model. These themes were subsumed under the overarching theme of social networks that emerged from the data.

Once approval was received from the research ethics board (REB19-0457), data were collected from multiple sources to ensure quality and rigour. Data consisted of interview excerpts, field notes prepared by the researcher, documents provided by participants, and information publicly available on websites. Following the interviews, participants were given the opportunity to review their interview transcripts and thematic summaries prepared by the researcher. The process aimed to ensure that these documents accurately captured their experiences and that the

researcher's interpretations aligned with their perspectives. Of the 11 participants who responded, eight indicated that no revisions were necessary, two provided additional data that had not been initially discussed during the interview, and one offered editorial comments. Excerpts from participant interviews are provided wherever possible in the following section to communicate their experiences accurately.

Results

Table 1 summarizes each participant's pseudonyms, gender, and years of initial chair appointment.

The participants' social networks played a crucial role in their development as department chairs. Their experiences are organized below into three interrelated themes: role

Table 1

List of Participants

Participant Profiles			
Pseudonym	Gender	Academic Title	Year of Initial Chair Appointment
Aaron	Male	Professor	2012
Bob	Male	Professor	2018
Carl	Male	Professor	2013
Dale	Male	Associate Professor	2018
Edith	Female	Associate Professor	2013
Grace	Female	Associate Professor	2018
Helen	Female	Senior Instructor	2019
Isaac	Male	Professor	2016
Jack	Male	Professor	2018
Kyle	Male	Professor	2012
Luke	Male	Professor	2014
Mark	Male	Professor	2017
Peter	Male	Associate Professor	2017
Ross	Male	Professor	2013
Theo	Female	Associate Professor	2019
Vern	Male	Professor	2019
Wayne	Male	Professor	2016

entry, role understanding, and skill development. Throughout the analysis, self-reflection became evident as a mediating factor. It played a significant role in enabling the participants to respond positively to invitations to enter the role, understand its complexities, and develop essential skills.

Theme 1: Role Access

While all department chair positions at the university underwent a formal institutional academic recruitment process, most participants learned about these vacancies informally through their social networks and received support to apply. In some cases, the participants were offered opportunities to serve on an interim basis before an official announcement or job advertising was made available to a broader community. For example, Vern noted that his department chair personally informed him about an upcoming formal search for his replacement and encouraged him to apply. Despite initially lacking interest in the role, the personal invitation prompted him to consider the option seriously. Vern emphasized the “overwhelming” support he received from other academic leaders and faculty members, which ultimately bolstered his confidence to pursue the appointment:

My department head told me that his term was coming to an end within a year and a half, so a Search and Selection Committee would be engaged to look for the next leader, and he said that he felt that I would potentially be good in that role. After that first meeting, I had individual meetings with other department heads who were encouraging me to apply. After speaking with them, it [the appointment] seemed more realistic.... The support was overwhelming, even amongst my department members. People would come to me and say, “We really support you to do this.” And that helped me a lot to think, “Okay, I’m making the right decision.” (Vern)

Initially, most participants who received personal invitations to apply for the role declined the invitation. However, they later reconsidered after reflecting on the persistent support and encouragement they were receiving from faculty within their networks. Theo openly admitted her initial hesitation, explaining that leadership was not her primary career focus. However, she ultimately decided to apply based on the unwavering encouragement and support she received from her network. Theo attributed her network to facilitating a seamless transition into the leadership role and making the process much smoother for her:

I was very stressed about the idea of taking on the headship role because most academics don’t get into academia to do this. They get in to teach and do their research. But I agreed to do it for the sake of everybody and very quickly discovered that it was a place where I could make a difference. I was the undergraduate coordinator for five or six years before I became head in the department. So, I had a very good understanding of policies, procedures, who to contact, and I had a very strong network of people all over the university that I could call on and talk to.... They made the transition catch-up very easy. (Theo)

Most participants had prior experience in administrative roles such as interim, deputy, assistant, and associate department chair or program director before taking on the department chair position. They emphasized that these preparatory positions were not obtained through a formal recruitment process but instead through personal invitations extended by academic leaders within their networks. Bob’s comments were a prime example of this scenario, as he had served as an interim department chair before ultimately deciding to apply for the five-year appointment. Like other participants, Bob highlighted the significance of the personal invitation he received from his dean to assume the department chair role on an interim basis. The invitation played a pivotal role in his decision to accept the position. Bob expressed that he would have been less inclined to apply had he become aware of the opening through a formal job posting:

The Dean of [Faculty] reached out to me to ask if I would be willing to take, at least what was initially, a time-limited appointment of two years as interim [department chair].... If it had been the same set of circumstances, and he had decided to post it [the role] rather than to contact me directly, I likely would have considered it, but I don’t know if I actually would have applied. (Bob)

Another participant, Isaac, described how his interest in academic leadership emerged from working collaboratively with academic leaders. He emphasized that the opportunity to work alongside these leaders early in his academic career revealed an interest in administration he had yet to recognize. Isaac expressed, “Sometimes it’s the luck that you get to work with people early on, and they happen to be leaders. That just naturally uncovers an interest you had that maybe you didn’t realize you had before.”

Access to social networks was instrumental in facilitating the participants' entry into department chair roles. They became aware of the upcoming vacancies and received substantial support primarily through their network connections. The participants' reflections on the personal invitations and the encouragement and personalized support they received, whether for interim positions or five-year appointments, significantly motivated them to apply. These invitations not only provided assurance but also instilled a sense of confidence in their abilities.

Theme 2: Role Understanding

The study participants emphasized that belonging to a network played a crucial role in shaping their understanding of the department chair's role. Most stressed that their interactions with mentors, current and former department chairs, faculty members, and non-academic staff helped them understand the position more comprehensively. Their networks provided valuable insights and perspectives, enabling them to grasp the roles' complexity. Peter shared his experience, emphasizing the valuable support he received from members of his network, which included former department chairs and a non-academic manager who played a crucial role in transitioning into the role:

I have spoken to, on a few occasions, the previous two heads in this department for advice. They've both been very forthcoming and helpful. The previous head and I, and then with the department manager, we would sit down and sort of go through the work...the transition really has occurred through the department manager who bridges the two headships and is sort of the holder of a lot of knowledge. I'm not sure honestly how else you would learn. (Peter)

Previous leadership roles provided valuable insights into academic governance, expanded the participants' networks, and familiarized them with the role's responsibilities. Despite feeling initially unprepared, social networks played a vital role in helping participants navigate challenges. For instance, Theo explained that she relied on the strong network she had built as program director across the university for support and guidance and emphasized the value of "holding each other's hands" to navigate challenges.

Although available to most participants upon entry into the role, job descriptions and terms of reference were noted for their inadequacy in providing orientation. The overarch-

ing sentiment among the participants was that these documents were overly generic, lacking in the necessary detail, and failed to accurately reflect the day-to-day duties and challenges that come with the role.

The document analysis revealed that several essential responsibilities of the chair role were not included in a publicly available career advertisement for a department chair position. The advertisement did not mention critical accountabilities for academic recruitment, performance evaluation, promotion or tenure processes, teaching assignments, student affairs, strategic planning, or budget management. The participants underscored the need for more precise and comprehensive formal communication regarding the expectations and requirements of the department chair position.

Furthermore, participants stressed that despite their substantial academic background and previous experiences in classroom and research settings, they felt ill-equipped to handle the distinct challenges of the chair role. Aaron provided an example emphasizing that the communication skills necessary to lead fellow faculty differed significantly and often clashed with the skills he had developed as a teacher and researcher:

I had an idea of what I thought the job entailed, but, in fact, it was much more than I had anticipated it would be. There were sort of two things: One, I didn't really have formal leadership training, and two, I really didn't have the full knowledge of what the job entailed. Those are the two kinds of impediments I had to overcome very quickly when I took on the position.... As a PI [principal investigator] in a lab, there is more hierarchy...there is a much bigger power differential. So, you adopt a "here's what you do." It's a lot more instructive. "Do this, do this, do this." But as a department head, it doesn't work the same way. You're dealing with different people. The dynamic is totally different. You have to adapt to doing things a different way. So, the leadership experience as a PI running my own lab did not help me. (Aaron)

To support the new department chair's onboarding, the university facilitated an annual orientation session. While only a portion of the participants attended, they acknowledged its importance in facilitating their transition into the role. They found the session's content informative and emphasized the benefits of networking with fellow department chairs. Dale, for instance, emphasized how the session provided him with essential knowledge and allowed him to establish new valuable connections:

The orientation session was useful for a couple of reasons. One is that they do provide a sort of formalized seminar on a topic, and I think that that's helpful. I think they're valuable for networking, just again, to know who some of the other people in equivalent positions are across the university and to hear what kinds of issues and problems they're encountering. I do think that there's a sort of combined benefit there, the formalized topic, but also the networking opportunity. (Dale)

The theme focused on how participants developed their understanding of the role. It emphasized the crucial role of networks in acquiring a comprehensive understanding, with interactions and mentorship from current and former department chairs, faculty members, and non-academic staff playing a vital role. Participants built or enhanced these networks through "preparatory" positions and university orientation sessions.

Theme 3: Skill Development

Most participants emphasized the importance of mentors or coaches in developing the necessary skills for the department chair role. They shared how individuals in their network played a crucial role in offering personalized learning experiences and support. In some cases, the university itself facilitated these mentorship relationships. Dale, for example, specifically underlined the benefits of regular interactions with a formal mentor appointed by his dean:

I received formal training as a department head through the Faculty of [name] mentoring program. I think it's a fairly formal program, so every new department head is partnered with an existing or an experienced department head or director of a school, and so we would meet, in theory, every two weeks.... It was more of an opportunity for us to talk about what's going on at various points of the year, the academic calendar, what's going on with my department and my challenges, and asking him for advice. Having somebody who is a designated person who I know and would be seeing and could save up questions to ask their advice was quite helpful. (Dale)

Canada's post-secondary shared governance framework and unionized institutional environments grant significant autonomy and flexibility to tenured academics. As a result, academic leaders must rely on influencing and collaboration to steer their units rather than on formal authority.

The university regularly conducted half-day in-house leadership workshops to develop these essential skills among department chairs. A document analysis of the previous year's workshops revealed that they covered various topics, including emotional intelligence, organizational culture, strategic planning, and difficult conversations. Most participants recognized the value of attending these sessions, mainly due to the opportunities for peer-to-peer learning. Like other study participants, Ross indicated that these sessions were valuable:

The university has a training academy for department heads and equivalents. There were various opportunities to meet, probably, four times a year or something like that...I [attended] four to six opportunities a year, something in that range. They typically would have a theme, and they would bring in a speaker, and then they would have discussions and those kinds of things...you'd have a chance to get together with your peers from other faculties and sit down and chat about, you know, "I did this, and what did you do," and that kind of thing. So, that was quite an opportunity. (Ross)

Carl offered a different perspective, proposing that leadership skills are best learned through direct collaboration with experienced leaders rather than attending workshops. He also expressed skepticism regarding the credibility of workshop facilitators as effective teachers. Carl candidly shared his viewpoint, mentioning:

All the training I took related to leadership and headship was bullshit. I trust more the experience of people who have actually done the role, especially on the affective and human side. I am extremely resistant to attempts of workshoping leaders.... You just get yourself involved and interacting with leaders. Working with those people on concrete projects for the good of many elevates your game because they're good. They have different skills, and it's an "Aha, this is something that makes me understand." (Carl)

Despite serving as department chairs for several years, most participants acknowledged that they needed to hone their skills to manage people issues within their departments. They emphasized that these issues represented their "number one," "hardest," or "biggest" challenges. Like other participants, Peter recognized the importance of skills for managing conflict. He emphasized that his work often entailed navigating complex, high-stakes situations:

The sort of wild card is people. I think there are people who are genuinely not civil and can really poison a department. Definitely, dealing with faculty members is the hardest part of it because a lot of things in academia are very high stakes for people.... We have faculty members who are worried about tenure and promotion and about the types of critiques that are going to derail their careers. These are significant, potentially life-changing issues. (Peter)

Edith shared her experience, noting that even after many years in the role, she still experienced stress and a sense of vulnerability and inadequacy when dealing with people issues:

The expectation is that you will solve problems. You have to be willing to just make decisions sometimes without looking for somebody to tell you that's the right decision. So honestly, and this is still true, and certainly, in the first few years I was head, my view was, "Well, the very worst thing that could happen is they would fire me as head, and I would go back to the job I was doing before, right?" (Edith)

This theme explored the importance of networks in the development of leadership skills. The participants emphasized the importance of reflecting on the personalized support and tailored learning experiences they accessed, which played a crucial role in their skill development and refinement. However, despite their years of experience, the participants acknowledged the ongoing challenges associated with managing people issues, which often led to feelings of stress and vulnerability.

Self-Reflection as a Moderating Mechanism

The participants' words showcased the significant impact of self-reflection on shaping their experiences across the three themes. Most intentionally set aside time to reflect, whether during moments of solitude, while attending one-on-one meetings with deans, mentors, and coaches, or in faculty meetings and retreats. Jack exemplified the profound impact of self-reflection on his leadership growth. He emphasized that self-reflection played a crucial role, especially when he could translate insights into his personal life, thus maximizing its value:

I have opportunities to reflect as a part of the coaching sessions, and I actually think that is one of the real values of having the coaching sessions.... They create a routine mechanism for reflection, both as part of the session, in preparation for, and follow up, that otherwise is easy to miss in the context of just how busy, you know, we all are and have all our activities to do.... Fundamentally, one has to have a growth mindset and view reflection as an important growth opportunity. I also think that if the content or focus broadly transcends one's professional life—and even, ideally, personal life—then that makes it [reflecting] very attractive. (Jack)

Throughout their leadership development journeys, the study participants recognized the importance of self-reflection. They purposefully set aside time for introspection, understanding the value of examining their assumptions and seeking input from others to gain fresh perspectives.

The study results identified the crucial role of social networks in the leadership development of newly appointed department chairs. The participants' networks played an essential role by personally inviting them to assume leadership positions, and these relationships continued to have a lasting impact on their ongoing development. Throughout the analysis, self-reflection emerged as a critical factor that positively influenced the participants' response to the support they received from their network members.

Discussion

The findings of this study contribute to a deeper understanding of leadership development among department chairs by providing detailed insights into their experiences, particularly during the early stages of their initial appointment. The qualitative analysis identified the centrality of networks and self-reflection throughout the three main themes of role access, role understanding, and skill development.

The participants indicated that social networks, especially when they included academic leaders, played an essential part in facilitating their entry to and understanding of the department chair's role and fostering their skill development. These findings align with previous research noting the importance of networks in advancing academic careers, adding that the networks are also critical to academic leadership development (Aprile et al., 2021; Christakis et al., 2010; DeLuca et al., 2017; Fields et al., 2019; Heffernan, 2021; Simmons & Taylor, 2019). They also support Gmelch and Buller's (2015) leadership development framework

outlining the important role of conceptual understanding, skill development, and self-reflection.

Role Access

The study revealed that most participants had prior leadership experience through preparatory positions where they had served as interim, deputy, assistant, or associate department chairs or program directors. These experiences effectively constituted an academic leadership pipeline, providing access to valuable benefits and ultimately leading participants to department chair roles. The benefits included gaining a broader understanding of the post-secondary landscape, developing awareness of academic leadership roles within the university, and expanding their leadership networks. The finding that participants had prior leadership experience when entering department chair roles is different from other studies suggesting that faculty entered the role without any prior leadership or management experience (Boyko, 2009; Chu, 2021; Gmelch & Buller, 2015). However, the participants' initial reluctance to enter the department chair role aligns with existing literature highlighting that academic leadership vacancies are difficult to fill because faculty members often pursue academic careers to advance their research and teaching interests rather than to pursue leadership appointments (Armstrong & Woloshyn, 2017; Bland et al., 2009; Boyko, 2009; Gmelch & Buller, 2015). Nevertheless, among the study participants, the preparatory experiences and network support played a crucial role in their decision to pursue the formal department chair appointment.

Building upon the existing literature, the present study introduces the concept of preparatory positions, which include the roles of interim, deputy, assistant, and associate department chair and program director. These preparatory positions served as essential precursors to the department chair role and significantly shaped the academic leadership pipeline at the university. These positions played a vital role in guiding faculty members' progression toward assuming the department chair role. They may have subsequently contributed to their advancement into more senior academic leadership positions.

This study also revealed that the proportion of women in department chair roles (18%) was smaller at the university than across Canadian public universities (34–36%; Boyko, 2009; Eaton & Burns, 2020). However, only department chairs in the faculties of arts, engineering, medicine, science, and veterinary medicine were included in this study because the role only existed in those faculties.

The proportion of women eligible to participate in the study might have been higher if more female-dominated faculties, such as nursing, social work, and education, had been departmentalized and included in the study. Nevertheless, the underrepresentation of women in the department chair role may be a manifestation of a broader issue regarding barriers that prevent women from advancing in their academic leadership careers.

Role Understanding

The participants emphasized the importance of preparatory experiences and networks in developing a comprehensive understanding of the department chair position. Upon assuming the role, they shared specific examples of how their interactions with current and former academic leaders, faculty members, and non-academic staff played a pivotal role in their understanding and personal growth. Job advertisements or terms of reference did not significantly contribute to this understanding, consistent with Boyko's (2009) findings. Moreover, a job posting for a department chair role was missing key accountabilities, such as academic recruitment, performance evaluation, promotion or tenure processes, teaching assignments, student affairs, strategic planning, or budget management. The inaccuracy of these documents underscores the importance of networks to support the transition of new department chairs, especially for faculty recruited from outside the institution.

Consistent with social network theory noting the benefits of networks for career progression, the interactions and relationships that study participants had with their leadership networks had a significant influence on their behaviour and decision-making processes. This influence was a critical factor that ultimately inspired them to pursue roles as department chairs. (Aprile et al., 2021; Baker & Bitto, 2021; Christakis et al., 2010; DeLuca et al., 2017; Fields et al., 2019; Heffernan, 2021; Leibowitz et al., 2014; Simmons & Taylor, 2019). Additionally, Acker (2012) noted that department chairs understand their roles through a process of socialization into leadership. The current study reveals that this process includes participants' involvement in preparatory roles, such as chairing committees, which equips them with valuable experience.

Skill Development

The literature presents differing perspectives on the development of leadership capacity among department chairs,

with some advocating for significant formal training and others emphasizing the value of direct observation and experience (Gmelch & Buller, 2015; Gonaim, 2016). Among the study participants, this learning predominantly occurred through the networks they had built in preparatory positions. The participants favoured mentorship and interactions with fellow academic leaders over formal training, which was consistent with the literature recommending pairing new department chairs with experienced chairs (Bland et al., 2009; Gmelch & Buller, 2015; Schnackenberg & Simard, 2018). The participants emphasized the importance of skills for self-awareness and engaging others. However, they downplayed skills related to strategic planning or leading change, possibly because many of these university's processes were managed centrally.

This research identifies the effectiveness of experiential learning in developing competency among department chairs, mainly as they engage in self-reflection during interactions with others. Both this research and existing literature indicate that newly appointed department chairs often encounter challenges during the initial stages of their appointment, stemming from disparities in the required competencies compared to their previous responsibilities in research and teaching. However, among the participants of this study, the lack of preparation was seen as a manageable obstacle.

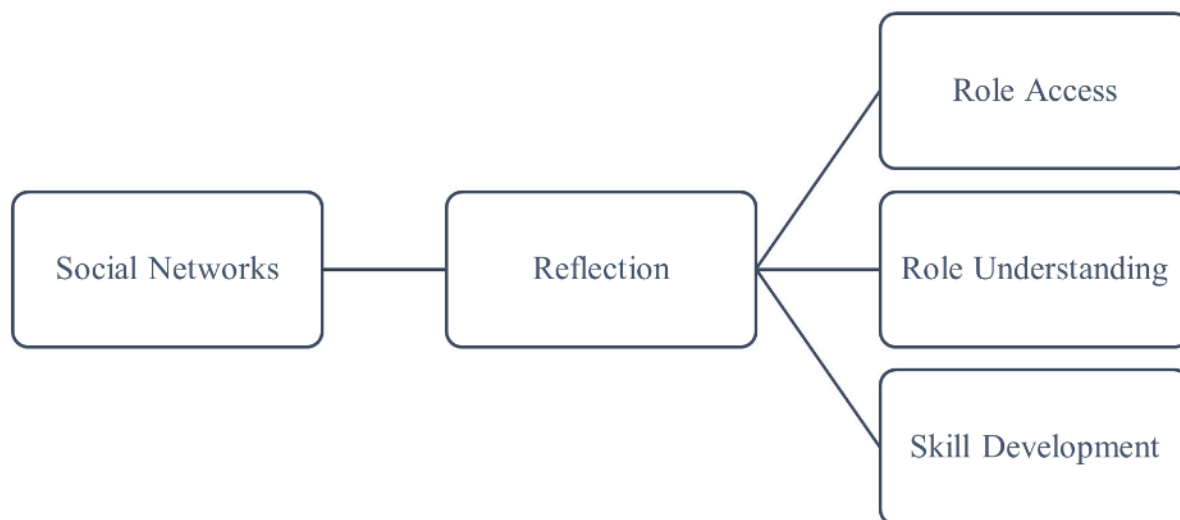
The Leadership Development Model

The Leadership Development Model for University Department Chairs depicted in Figure 1 extends Gmelch and Buller's (2015) foundational work by adding social networks and reflection as pivotal starting points in the leadership development process. The model posits that social networks are instrumental from the outset, catalyzing a process of self-reflection and granting faculty members access to leadership opportunities. This self-reflection informs and shapes their understanding of the department chair's role and aids in the cultivation of necessary skills. Additionally, while Gmelch and Buller (2015) focused on the developmental aspects of leadership within the individual, this study notes the external, social factors that facilitate this development, especially as they pertain to recruitment and mentorship practices.

This study emphasizes the substantial impact of social networks on the leadership development of department chairs. To support newly appointed chairs and enhance the candidate pools for these positions, institutions may facilitate the growth and accessibility of networks, which could involve creating institutional platforms for networking, encouraging participation in interdisciplinary research groups, or hosting leadership development events that foster connections across departments and faculties. However, in terms of role access, the practice of relying predominantly on personal invitations for preparatory leadership positions

Figure 1

Leadership Development Model for University Department Chairs



should be re-examined. To create a more equitable leadership pipeline, institutions would benefit from adopting selection processes that are transparent and open to prevent the inadvertent exclusion of interested and capable faculty members, particularly from historically marginalized groups.

Additionally, formal mentorship programs should be a cornerstone of leadership development strategies. By systematically pairing experienced leaders with emerging ones, institutions can ensure that the transfer of knowledge and skills is intentional and structured. Such programs can also help democratize the process of leadership development, ensuring that all potential leaders can benefit from mentorship, regardless of their existing networks.

This study's findings open multiple avenues for future research. Explorations may include inquiries into the experiences of faculty from equity-seeking groups, including mentorship dynamics and access to networks. Longitudinal studies can provide insight into how mentorship influences immediate leadership development and the effectiveness and outcomes of these relationships over time. Additionally, the role of formal leadership training as a complement to experiential learning deserves attention. Comparative studies could identify the most impactful elements leading to a more integrated approach to developing academic leaders.

Although the study presents novel findings, it has some limitations that restrict its generalizability. The study explored the experiences of participants from a single research-intensive university who had accepted invitations to enter the department chair role. It did not include the viewpoints of academic leaders in more senior positions or faculty members who decided not to pursue a formal five-year department chair appointment after serving in a preparatory capacity. Additionally, data related to equity, diversity, and inclusion were not collected, potentially leading to a lack of representation from historically marginalized groups. Further, the experiences of women in department chair roles may differ from those of men, and having more women in the sample might have shed light on this. Despite these limitations, the findings can inform the design or improvement of institutional academic leadership development programs, emphasizing the value of social networks.

Conclusions

This study investigated leadership development among department chairs and uncovered the critical role of leadership networks and self-reflection in this process. The

participants' engagement with their social networks proved critical in their journey toward assuming the role, understanding its complexities, and honing crucial leadership skills through meaningful interactions and introspective experiences. The findings emphasized the profound impact of social networks on the development of department chairs and underscored the significance of reflective practices.

The study contributes to the existing body of research by providing empirical evidence that supports the importance of social networks in leadership accession and development, a subject that has been less explored in academic leadership literature, particularly within the context of Canadian universities.

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