

LEADERSHIP TRAINING FOR DEPARTMENT CHAIRS: INTEGRATING FORMAL TRAINING, EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING, AND MENTORSHIP

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The study explores the link between formal training, experiential learning, mentorship, and the leadership development of department chairs at a Canadian university. Employing a framework analysis approach grounded in transformative learning theory, data from 17 semi-structured interviews revealed that formal training imparted essential knowledge and skills to new chairs. However, the training's influence on the chairs' development varied, depending on individual career stages and previous leadership experiences. Participants identified experiential learning as a vital element of their leadership development, with prior leadership roles providing a solid base for a successful transition. Mentorship emerged as a transformative instrument, offering timely developmental opportunities through exchanges with experienced leaders. The study concludes that strategically

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combining learning approaches can enhance institutional leadership capacity and facilitate faculty members' transition into department chair roles, particularly in the context of the post-COVID-19 pandemic and the ongoing leadership crisis.

Introduction

Universities play a pivotal role in society, influencing various sectors, including politics and the economy (Aarrevarra et al., 2021; Ruben et al., 2023). The continued significance of universities, particularly in the face of societal questions about their importance, depends substantially on the availability of visionary leaders with the strength and capacity to bring innovation and transformation to their institutions (Christensen et al., 2016). The need is critical as Canadian universities face a leadership crisis driven by an aging professoriate, gender disparity in senior academic roles, and a generational gap exacerbated by the impending retirement of baby boomers (McGinn, 2023; Statistics Canada, 2023).

The post-COVID-19 context has further complicated the landscape of academic leadership. Recent research has explored the impact of pandemic-related challenges on departmental leadership, highlighting how positions that were already quite ambiguous and challenging became even more complicated with the demands of crisis leadership (Gigliotti, 2021).

Literature Review

The academic leadership pipeline at universities begins with the department chairs, who are also the crucial links between institutional strategy and its execution. Department chairs are the primary point of contact and support for students, faculty members, and non-academic staff. Department chairs' responsibilities encompass managing departmental resources and leading critical processes for academic recruitment, evaluation, tenure, and promotion (Brinkley-Etzkorn & Lane, 2019; Gmelch & Buller, 2015). Research indicates that department chairs may influence up to 80% of all decisions made at universities, yet despite the significance of the role, the positions remain "among the least studied and most misunderstood" in higher education leadership (Brown & Moshavi, 2002; Gmelch et al., 2017, p. 4).

Entering the department chair role requires developing new leadership and management skills, not typically relevant in the candidates' prior teaching and research appointments, often alongside considerable workloads (Gigliotti & Ruben, 2017; Gmelch & Buller, 2015; Gmelch & Miskin, 2011; Ruben et al., 2023). Boyko's (2009) and Cowley's (2017) research in Canada emphasize that faculty members often need additional preparation to undertake leadership roles, highlighting a need for institutions to provide more support and structured training programs.

An investigation by Stawnychko (2024) highlighted that the department chairs' professional networks were central to their leadership development. However, the investigation did not explore how the different learning methods used by the university to support academic leaders contributed to their learning. The present study expands on the previous findings by presenting the results of a secondary analysis. The central research question was: How do formal training, experiential learning, and mentorship contribute to department chairs' leadership development?

The study utilizes framework analysis, a thematic qualitative research approach, and draws on transformative learning theory to explore the learning and transformations experienced by faculty members transitioning into department head roles (Crotty, 2015; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Transformative learning is an adult learning theory that focuses on the cognitive process of meaning-making (Kasworm & Bowles, 2012; MacKeracher, 2004; Merriam, 2018; Mezirow, 2000). The theory explains how individuals change their perspectives and assumptions, transforming their beliefs, attitudes, and actions through self-reflection (Kegan, 2018). The transformative learning process entails accessing experiences or situations where emotions, intuition, context, and relationships play a role in challenging the learner, acting as catalysts to engage in rational discourse and critical self-reflection (Dirkx et al., 2006; Merriam, 2018). As a result, perspective transformation occurs, followed

by changes in behavior and integration of these new perspectives into the learner's life. In leadership development, transformative learning provides a framework for understanding how leaders can develop new perspectives and behaviors that align with their evolving responsibilities. Studies have shown that effective leadership often requires a transformative shift in thinking, moving from a focus on technical skills to a broader understanding of strategic and relational dynamics (Dirkx et al., 2006; Kasworm & Bowles, 2012). Transformative learning theory helps to explain how leaders develop the capacity to lead, navigate complex challenges, and engage in reflective practice (Gmelch & Buller, 2015; Heffernan, 2020).

Despite the substantial body of literature on leadership development, there remains a need for more focused research on the combined impact of formal training, experiential learning, and mentorship on the leadership development of department chairs. By examining these elements through the lens of transformative learning, the study aims to provide deeper insights into the processes that support effective leadership development in academic settings.

The postpandemic context has added a layer of complexity to the already challenging role of department chairs. Studies have documented how academic leaders had to rapidly adapt to virtual environments, maintain academic standards, and support their teams through the uncertainties brought about by the pandemic (Gigliotti, 2021). These challenges required enhanced crisis management skills and the ability to provide effective leadership under pressure. The pandemic has underscored the need for comprehensive leadership development programs that equip department chairs with traditional skills and the agility and resilience needed to handle crises.

Formal leadership training can impart essential knowledge and skills to academic leaders by addressing specific competencies, such as strategic planning, conflict management, and communication skills (Cipriano & Riccardi, 2018; Ruben et al., 2023). However, the impact of such training varies depending on individual career stages and previous leadership experiences (Boyko, 2009; Cowley, 2017). Experiential learning, including prior leadership roles and hands-on involvement in academic administration, has been identified as

a vital element of leadership development. Such experiences provide practical insights and foster a strategic mindset essential for effective leadership (Brinkley-Etzkorn & Lane, 2019; Gmelch & Miskin, 2011). The role of mentorship in academic leadership development is well-documented. Engaging with experienced mentors provides new leaders with guidance, support, and opportunities for critical reflection, which are fundamental aspects of transformative learning (Bland et al., 2009; Fields et al., 2019; Heffernan, 2020).

The study employs a framework analysis approach grounded in transformative learning theory to explore the interplay of formal training, experiential learning, and mentorship in the leadership development of department chairs.

Methods

The study utilizes framework analysis, a thematic qualitative research approach, and draws on transformative learning theory to explore the learning and transformations experienced by faculty members transitioning into department head roles (Crotty, 2015; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Transformative learning theory informed the study's design and the data analysis. The theory provides a lens to understand how participants' perspectives and assumptions are challenged and transformed through their leadership experiences by focusing on the cognitive process of meaning-making (Kasworm & Bowles, 2012; Mezirow, 2000).

During data collection, the semi-structured interview questions were designed to elicit reflections on participants' experiences with formal training, experiential learning, and mentorship. Questions focused on how these experiences influenced their leadership development and prompted participants to reflect on changes in their beliefs, attitudes, and actions (see Appendix A). The approach aligns with transformative learning theory's emphasis on critical self-reflection and discourse (Dirkx et al., 2006).

The framework analysis, guided by the principles of transformative learning theory, identifies themes related to perspective transformation, critical reflection, and changes in behavior (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). By systematically applying the theoretical framework, the study aims to highlight how department chairs develop

new leadership capacities and adapt to the evolving demands of their roles.

CONTEXT

The investigation involved faculty members in department chair roles at a comprehensive research-intensive university in western Canada. The researcher selected the institution because of its geographical accessibility and the institutional support received for the investigation. At the time of the research, the university had a cohort of 49 department chairs across various disciplines, which ensured a robust sample size and a diverse range of experiences for investigation.

The university had a training academy that offered department chairs a series of eight half-day workshops annually. A formal evaluation of the program in 2017 indicated that participants benefited from the offerings and highly valued the opportunity to network with fellow leaders. The workshops included content related to emotional intelligence, developing culture, strategic planning, navigating difficult conversations, coaching, delegation without authority, developing high-performance teams, and supporting teaching excellence.

In addition to the training academy, medical school academic leaders had access to a specialized cohort-based leadership program developed and delivered by the medical school in partnership with the university's business school. The curriculum focused explicitly on the education-healthcare context, addressing general leadership principles and topics on business acumen, high-performance negotiating, and entrepreneurial thinking. The program featured seven monthly day-long workshops, culminating in a formal networking event. The medical school strongly encouraged department chairs to complete the program and to nominate other faculty members who exhibited leadership potential to attend. There appeared to be no formal coordination between the university's training program and the medical school's offering.

DATA COLLECTION

Following approval from the research ethics board (REB19-0457), data collection involved semi-structured interviews with participants from April 1 to Decem-

ber 31, 2019. The researcher sent email invitations for interview participation to faculty members whom the university's human resources department had identified as actively serving in department chair roles. Twenty-one faculty members accepted the invitation; no follow-up reminders were sent to nonrespondents. The researcher conducted 17 individual semi-structured interviews in private environments free from distractions with the faculty members who were available.

To ensure consistency and reliability, the researcher tracked which department chairs participated in one or both of the training programs offered at the university. While not all chairs in the study were alumni of these programs, those who had participated provided insights into the benefits they gained from the training, particularly the value of networking with peers. The researcher prepared field notes for each session, including the interview's date, time, and location, and collected audio recordings. The researcher performed member checks by requesting that participants review their interview transcripts and thematic summaries. Eight participants responded, affirming that no revisions were necessary; two participants provided additional data not shared during the initial interview, and one participant suggested a minor modification. The researcher integrated all participant feedback into the final analysis.

DATA ANALYSIS

Framework analysis was used for the secondary exploration of qualitative data. The exploration examined aspects of the original research question that were only partially addressed through a qualitative case study and thematic analysis. The secondary analysis approach aligns with sustainable research practices by fully using already collected data, thereby reducing the need for additional participant involvement (Bishop & Kuula-Luumi, 2017; Goldsmith, 2021; Heaton, 2008). In the analysis, the researcher's extensive knowledge of the data and context facilitated using themes to develop formal training, experiential learning, and mentorship categories.

The coding process included several stages: familiarization with the data, open coding using NVivo 14, and axial coding to group related codes into themes (Merriam, 2018; Saldaña, 2021). Finally, selective

coding refined these themes into core findings. Member checks and peer debriefing were conducted to ensure the reliability of the data.

The researcher removed any personally identifiable information during interview transcription to maintain participant confidentiality and used codes and pseudonyms to associate participants' records with their responses. All participants signed informed consent forms outlining the research protocol before conducting the interviews.

Results

The analysis identified formal training, experiential learning, and mentorship as distinct components of the department chairs' leadership development, each contributing uniquely to a transformative experience.

FORMAL TRAINING

Participants used a variety of formal learning strategies to meet the demands of the department chair role, focusing on institutional training programs and professional association offerings. Structured settings provided a respite from daily duties and enabled participants to immerse themselves purposefully in a learning environment. Interactive and case-based discussions, practical problem-solving, experience sharing, and critical reflection contributed to refining the approach to the department chair role.

Although not all chairs participated in the formal training programs available, those who did so only enrolled after they were already in their chair appointments, which made attending difficult given their many new responsibilities. Despite some doubts about the relevance of specific workshops, many acknowledged the structured programs' value, citing a broad range of benefits. Participants acquired new knowledge and practical skills crucial for leadership and management, including mentoring, navigating intergenerational dynamics, and conflict management. The prevalent sentiment among participants confirmed the significant role of educational experiences in enhancing their leadership capabilities. *Bob* echoed the sentiment emphasizing that effective leadership is not merely an inherent instinct but a skill to be nurtured through deliberate learning and reflection:

Leadership is a skill that can be learned. It's not necessarily something that comes naturally to everybody, even to people who think it does [laughs]. It's something that good leaders do spend some time thinking about and reflecting on in terms of how they lead and what they are doing to facilitate leadership, as opposed to just winging it. (*Bob*, five years in the chair role, STEM field)

Several participants recognized that lacking formal leadership training had impeded their understanding and performance in the department chair role. These individuals also reported experiencing a shift in their leadership style after completing leadership training and learning that working collaboratively and involving others in problem-solving would yield better results. Formal training facilitated knowledge acquisition and enhanced the participants' interpersonal and communication skills, thus better equipping them to manage difficult conversations and lead diverse teams. Sessions focused on personal effectiveness and mental toughness, presented strategies for managing complex problems, and introduced vital skills such as coaching and active listening. *Aaron's* experience illustrates the developmental power of the training, particularly in the context of communication and interpersonal dynamics:

I really realized that I just have to listen and treat people like individuals. That was probably the biggest thing I learned...Those difficult conversations were tougher at the start, but then I learned how to have them, and some of the training helped with that. (*Aaron*, seven years in the chair role, STEM field)

However, the influence of formal training on learning was not uniform among the participants. Some highlighted that their experience was intricately tied to where they stood in their career trajectories and depended on other factors such as personality, context, and previous experiences. With years of wisdom and experience, some participants reflected on their nuanced comprehension of academic leadership, indicating that seasoned academics might benefit less from formal training than those earlier in their careers. Consequently, formal training intersected

with personal and professional milestones, leading to diverse learning outcomes. As *Ross* indicated, leadership development is not simply about accumulating new knowledge but is also profoundly influenced by the maturity and self-awareness that often come with age and experience:

I think a lot depends on your personality, your context, and your previous experiences. I came in here when I was 54 years old; it had been 20 or 22 years past my PhD. I had done sort of middle-management things. You know, I didn't just fall off the turnip truck yesterday. (*Ross*, six years in the chair role, STEM field)

The impact of formal learning on the development of participants as leaders was multifaceted, varying across individual experiences but consistently recognized as fundamental to professional growth. Formal training served to accumulate knowledge and was perceived as a catalyst for a transformation in leadership identity. Participants observed that the training offered a framework to assess their leadership style critically, incorporate new strategies, and adaptively respond to the changing demands of their roles. Ultimately, formal learning experiences led to skill acquisition and supported the evolution of participants into academic leaders. However, the programs' alumni did not appear to have formal opportunities for ongoing development.

EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING

Participants' transformative experiences stemmed from active engagement in leadership roles and observation of other academic leaders in action. Roles as acting or interim department chairs, academic program directors, and committee chairs enhanced their leadership skills and deepened their understanding of the university's policies, systems, and procedures. Hands-on involvement strengthened participants' confidence and aided in developing supportive networks among academic leaders, proving invaluable during their transition to full department chair positions. The preparatory roles enhanced the skills and strategic mindset essential for effective leadership and fostered an appreciation for the complex relationship between administrative responsibilities and academic objectives.

Preparatory experiences eased participants' transitions into department chair roles, where practical experience in strategic planning and interpersonal relationship management became critical to their leadership practice. Direct observation of leadership dynamics and the opportunity to lead and resolve conflicts cultivated a practical and immersive learning environment, fostering a collaborative decision-making approach. These practical experiences encouraged participants to adopt a more collaborative and consultative decision-making style. *Jack's* narrative exemplifies the journey, as his preparatory roles offered him a front-row seat to the inner workings of academic leadership, equipping him with the practical knowledge necessary for his subsequent role as department head. His testimony underscores the value of learning through direct involvement with the leadership role:

My department had invited me to become deputy department head maybe a year or two prior.... I was very fortunate to have those leadership opportunities because they were opportunities to interact with people, to lead meetings, and to try to negotiate or navigate some conflict. I really saw the inside of how an academic organization really works. I picked up a lot from that. I really learned a lot about how this all works and happens, which helped me very much.

(*Jack*, one year in the chair role, STEM field)

On assuming the department chair role, participants experienced a significant transition period, during which they began recognizing the importance of their administrative contributions. Participants engaged in experiential learning and critical self-reflection, often evolving from directive to collaborative and consultative leadership styles. Engaging with diverse leaders throughout the university honed participants' skills to address a wider array of leadership challenges. Hands-on management of daily operations and long-term departmental strategies developed their administrative acumen and reinforced their adaptability, communication, and strategic talent management abilities. Their leadership development journeys were marked by personal growth, heightened self-awareness, and fulfillment, with many, like *Theodora*, discovering that the chair role offered opportunities to influence the behavior of others and have a positive impact in the department:

I came to the position under duress; I didn't want to do it. I was very stressed about the idea of taking on the headship role...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. My reasons for doing this are, first of all, being able to create a better work environment for myself and for others. (Theodora, one year in the chair role, non-STEM field)

Within their leadership roles, participants undertook critical self-reflection, developed distinct leadership styles, and broadened their understanding of their strengths and weaknesses. The iterative process of assessing their successes and challenges fostered personal growth and an evolution in their approaches to leadership. Throughout their tenures, participants navigated paths characterized by self-realization and growth, with hands-on experiences serving as catalysts for continual learning and adaptation. The self-discovery path was underscored by a deeper understanding of how personal values align with professional fulfillment and the core of effective leadership. *Luke's* reflection encapsulates the learning experience, revealing that despite the trade-offs in his research productivity, he found profound satisfaction in facilitating his colleagues' achievements, affirming the intrinsic rewards of the role:

Fundamentally, you have to realize what makes you happy and what you are...All of this stuff you just learn as it happens. You just go through it the first time; hopefully, you don't make the same mistake the second time. When it's all said and done if I have made the university a better place, that will make me feel good about what I've done. To see people succeed is, without a doubt, the biggest reward of this job. (Luke, 5 years in the chair role, STEM field)

Participants' experiential learning highlighted personal and professional growth originating from active engagement in leadership roles and critical self-reflection. As they progressed through various roles, they not only refined their leadership skills but also began to measure success through the collective progress of their teams. The narratives demonstrate that effective leadership is cultivated through a synthesis of formal

knowledge, hands-on role engagement, and a robust support system, all crucial components of the participants' learning and self-discovery. The journeys revealed that leadership capacity is developed in the execution of duties through thoughtful reflection.

MENTORSHIP

Mentorship was identified as a fundamental element in the participants' leadership development, offering guidance that facilitated their navigation through the complexities of their role as department chairs. Engaging with former department chairs and seasoned leaders through mentorship allowed participants to gain practical insights into effective leadership. Seasoned mentors facilitated ongoing dialogues that provided new department heads the strategies and wisdom required to meet their daily responsibilities.

Mentor-mentee relationships within the university offered immediate and actionable advice, helping align leadership decisions with the institution's culture. Conversely, insights from mentors affiliated with external universities expanded the participants' perspectives, permitting them to witness diverse organizational practices and incorporate new, innovative ideas into their leadership approach. *Dale's* narrative is a testament to the profound impact of mentorship, detailing how regular consultations with a mentor helped him discover the difference between managing and leading, ultimately guiding him through a philosophical and pragmatic transformative journey:

Having somebody who is a designated person whom I know I would be seeing and could save up questions to ask their advice was quite helpful... I learned that there's a difference between managing and leading. I tried to be a leader without letting my ego come in the way. Balancing the administrative with the academic was as much a philosophical journey as a practical one.

(Dale, 1-year in the chair role, non-STEM field)

Among the myriad advantages of mentorship was the heightened confidence in decision-making abilities that participants gained, stemming from substantial opportunities for self-reflection. These mentoring relationships granted access to advice, networking opportunities, and a range of perspectives that aided in resolving

immediate issues and equipping participants with the foresight and skills to address future challenges.

Assuming the role of chair significantly enhanced participants' confidence, preparing them to enact change, confront departmental challenges, and bring their teams together around common goals. For seasoned academics, transitioning to a leadership role provided a revitalizing new viewpoint, enabling the use of their extensive experience in novel and significant ways, fostering professional renewal and an enhanced sense of purpose. In some cases, the experience led to a shift in career focus toward administrative responsibilities over research and teaching. Furthermore, developing interpersonal and emotional intelligence skills in readiness for and during the execution of the chair role enhanced participants' abilities, which also proved beneficial in their personal lives. Listening effectively and engaging with empathy strengthened relationships outside the university, demonstrating that the competencies needed for effective leadership are equally transformative and beneficial in private life. *Ross's* reflections further underline the transformative impact of the chair role, revealing how it can lead to a better understanding of one's influence and the positive ripple effects one can create, both professionally and personally:

I am leveraging actually quite modest skills, working incredibly hard to accomplish quite amazing things, and it's phenomenal. I have literally come to understand that all of us—especially those of us with education opportunities—we can literally change the planet. We have incredible power and ability. If you make positive and happy your default mode, you become a much better person; people appreciate your presence, and they like to be with you professionally and personally. You bring out the best in the people around you. (*Ross* 6 years in the chair role, STEM field)

Mentorship appeared as a transformative journey for participants, providing advice and guidance through substantial exchanges with experienced leaders knowledgeable about the subtleties of academic leadership roles. It served as a bridge, allowing the participants to draw on the wisdom of those who had previously navigated similar paths, enhancing

their leadership capacity. The relationships facilitated a greater understanding of academic challenges, managing conflicts, and creating a personal leadership identity. More than just a source of support, mentorship gave the respondents the confidence to embrace the role. It was transformative in its ability to connect individuals with the rich experiences and expertise of others, fostering new perspectives and more effective role navigation. Beyond practical insights, mentorship encouraged profound self-reflection, aiding individuals in aligning their personal goals, values, and aspirations with their professional journey, thus laying the groundwork for ongoing personal growth and development.

SUMMARY

Formal training, experiential learning, and mentorship helped faculty member's transition into department chair roles. Structured training programs laid the groundwork, endowing leaders with essential knowledge and skills, while experiential learning offered a real-world context to apply and refine the learnings. The practical approach facilitated the development of a strategic mindset among new leaders, enabling them to adeptly navigate the university's complex ecosystem. However, the programs' alumni did not appear to have formal opportunities for ongoing development. Mentorship introduced a tailored learning option, providing guidance and support from experienced leaders, which expanded viewpoints and promoted professional growth. Together, various learning experiences were perceived to stimulate transformative processes, enabling leaders to progress in their roles, enhance their practical abilities and reflect on their progress. The overall learning experience was characterized by profound growth, leading to a nuanced approach to leadership that was adaptive, empathetic, and reflective.

The study findings are summarized in the Transformative Learning Model for University Department Chairs (see [Figure 1](#)). In the model, transformative learning is influenced by three core elements: formal training, experiential learning, and mentorship. These elements feed into transformative learning, suggesting that they contribute to the comprehensive development of faculty members in department chair roles.

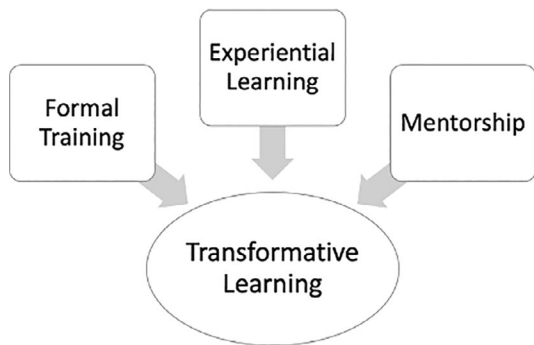


Figure 1 Transformative Learning Model for University Department Chairs

Discussion

The author's extensive leadership experiences in private, nonprofit, and postsecondary sectors inform the study design and results. These experiences shaped a practitioner-researcher's view of leadership dynamics within diverse organizational structures. Specifically, collaborating with university decision-makers such as presidents, provosts, and deans provided valuable insights into strategic decision-making. A reflective approach was adopted throughout the research process to critically evaluate potential biases derived from the author's background.

The findings offer new perspectives on the roles that formal training, experiential learning, and mentorship play in the development of academic leaders. The data from the interviews and analysis align with the work of Mezirow (2000) and Kegan (2018), which note that adults meet adaptive challenges through transformative learning not only to know 'more' but also to know 'differently.' The participants' intensive scrutiny of their presuppositions and experiences led to significant perspective transformations, which enhanced their leadership abilities. As demonstrated by the participants' narratives, the evolution highlights the need for nurturing educational settings that foster reflection, challenge existing paradigms, and cultivate administratively competent, adaptive, and self-aware leaders.

Transformative learning theory examines how individuals alter their frames of reference through critically reflecting on their experiences. The theory has been widely applied in adult education, emphasizing the importance of self-reflection in facilitating deep, meaningful learning. Transformative learning involves not just acquiring new

knowledge but engaging in a fundamental shift in how individuals perceive themselves and their roles within their organizations (Kegan, 2018; Merriam, 2018).

In the context of academic leadership development, transformative learning provides a framework for understanding how leaders can develop new perspectives and behaviors that align with their evolving responsibilities. Studies have shown that effective leadership often requires a transformative shift in thinking, moving from a focus on technical skills to a broader understanding of strategic and relational dynamics (Dirkx et al., 2006; Kasworm & Bowles, 2012). Transformative learning theory helps explain how academic leaders develop the capacity to navigate complex challenges and engage in reflective practice (Gmelch & Buller, 2015; Heffernan, 2020).

All study participants had access to formal training to facilitate their transition into the position of department chair, a situation contrasting with literature reporting that only 3% of department chairs in the United States and about 50% in Canada have such access (Boyko, 2009; Cipriano & Riccardi, 2018; Gmelch & Buller, 2015). The variance could be ascribed to the university's strategic emphasis on building leadership capacity across the institution. Additionally, most participants who enrolled in training did so after they were already in their chair roles, which is consistent with adult learning theory, which posits that learners are more inclined to engage when the learning fulfills immediate and practical needs, although it made participation more difficult given their new responsibilities (Kasworm & Bowles, 2012; MacKeracher, 2004).

Participants emphasized the vital importance of practical experiences in cultivating their leadership abilities. Many had previously held preparatory positions, providing them with background knowledge and strong networks, which they deemed essential for their effective transition into the chair position. The findings expand the existing literature, suggesting that most faculty members enter department chair roles underprepared and without substantial prior leadership experience (Boyko, 2009; Cowley, 2017; Gmelch & Buller, 2015). Upon assuming their new roles, participants continued to develop their leadership skills through experiential learning by addressing the demands of their positions and by observing other academic leaders, which is in line with literature indi-

cating that the role of a department chair is diverse and is best learned through direct observation and hands-on practice (Brinkley-Etzkorn & Lane, 2019). Reflecting Boyko's assertion that there is no Canadian 'how-to' guide for department chair training (Boyko, 2009, p. 64), faculty members in the study acquired leadership skills and insights predominantly through experiential learning and their professional networks.

Participants gained from the competencies and expertise of more experienced academic leaders, which they developed through their professional affiliations. The value of mentorship in the careers of research and teaching faculty is frequently emphasized in the literature for its ability to bridge theoretical knowledge with practical application (Bland et al., 2009; Fields et al., 2019; Heffernan, 2020; Simmons & Taylor, 2019). Integrating mentorship into leadership development aligns with the preset body of work, highlighting that engagement with experienced mentors can foster critical reflection, a fundamental aspect of transformative learning. However, providing accessible mentorship to department chairs can be challenging as a result of the potentially limited availability of qualified mentors.

Implications and Limitations

To enhance institutional leadership capacity and expedite the transition of faculty members to department chair roles, higher education administrators could prioritize funding and resources for academic leadership development initiatives tailored to early and midcareer academics. The findings may be used to inform the design and implementation of comprehensive programs that offer learning opportunities to faculty members before they assume the chair role and incorporate supportive mentorship relationships with seasoned leaders both within and outside the institution.

The study, based on a single large research-focused institution in Canada, may not reflect the resources and opportunities available at other universities. Additionally, the potential bias introduced by the researcher's familiarity with the specific institutional setting and prior work in the field might have influenced the data's categorization and interpretation. Future research involving multiple researchers and different methodological approaches could mitigate the bias by conducting similar explorations in different institutional contexts.

Conclusions

Developing academic leaders is a complex, iterative process. As universities continue to evolve and adapt in a post-COVID context, the insights gained from the study provide a valuable roadmap for cultivating adaptive and reflective leaders. Structured learning provides essential knowledge and skills, while practical experience offers real-world contexts for applying and refining these skills. Additionally, mentorship adds tailored guidance and support, promoting development through critical reflection. By strategically and proactively preparing future academic leaders through these combined methods, institutions can effectively strengthen their leadership pipelines and overall capacity.

Author Contributions

The author alone is responsible for the content and writing of the current article.

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Conflict of Interest Statement

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of the current paper. This research was conducted independently and has not been influenced by any external organization. There were no financial or personal relationships with other people or organizations that could inappropriately bias this work.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are not publicly available due to privacy and ethical restrictions. The data include sensitive information about participants, which may lead to the identification of individ-

uals, even with anonymization. However, de-identified data may be made available from the corresponding author upon request and with appropriate institutional approvals.

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Appendix A

Interview Questions

Research Title:

Leadership Development Experiences of Department Chairs at a Canadian University

Research Question:

How do department chairs develop their leadership capacity?

Interview Questions:

1. What were the circumstances that resulted in your appointment as department chair?
2. What leadership training or experience did you have at the time of your appointment?
3. What leadership development opportunities were made available to you after the appointment?
4. Which of these opportunities were you able to take advantage of?
5. Which knowledge or skills were the most difficult to learn? What helped you learn those skills?
6. What were the biggest challenges you faced during the first year of your appointment?
7. Overall, what are your biggest challenges in the role? What are your biggest rewards?
8. How often do you have opportunities to engage in self-reflection?
9. Knowing what you know now, what would you do differently to prepare for the role?
10. Would you pursue or accept other leadership opportunities in the future?