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LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT EXPERIENCES OF DEPARTMENT CHAIRS AT A CANADIAN UNIVERSITY

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Abstract

I will present the preliminary findings of a doctoral research study that explores the leadership development experiences of department chairs at a West Canadian university. The literature review, document analysis and themes emerging from semi-structured interviews with chairs of departments of diverse disciplines and sizes will also be explored.

Keywords: academic leadership, faculty development, chairpersons, department chairs, qualitative methods

Description of the session

Leadership is an essential determinant of success in organizations. Strong and adaptable leadership is particularly important in postsecondary settings due to an increasingly complex and dynamic social, economic and policy context. There is no literature concerning department chairs originating in western Canada, and what is available, predominantly from the USA, indicates that most institutions do not provide adequate leadership development opportunities to department chairs. This area of research is important because the actions of department chairs can dramatically affect a university's effectiveness and productivity.

The study explores how department chairs at a publicly funded Canadian university experience leadership development. It also examines department chair' perceptions about the efficacy of leadership development programs available to them. The epistemological stance that guides the study is constructionism, which recognizes that knowledge is uniquely constructed by each individual and that learning is contextual and occurs through creative experimentation. The study follows a case study design including a literature review, document analysis and semi-structured interviews. The central research question asks: What experiences of department chairs were the most helpful to learning what the role entailed?

The literature review incorporates leadership theory, leadership development, transformational learning, the department chair, and the national and provincial contexts. The document analysis involves formal leadership development programs including: course/session content, participation rates, evaluations/surveys, and assessments. Other documents include a collective agreement, position descriptions, and TOR of relevant

governance bodies. Interviews with 45-55 department chairs will be conducted until saturation is reached using these questions as a guide:

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

Data collection including interviews will be completed by December 31, 2019. The study received ethics approval.

The findings of the study will inform the kinds of leadership development programs that would be most helpful to faculty aspiring to accept department chair appointments. The research also seeks to gain insights and offer recommendations for new leadership development programs, and potential adjustments to programs already available.

Delegates will have the opportunity to learn from the experiences of department chairs at a postsecondary institution in Canada, and from recommendations regarding leadership development offerings. The audience will have the opportunity to ask questions, and will be invited to engage in brief small group discussions to discuss the applicability of the findings in their own academic settings.