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Cultivating Leaders: Professional Development Needs Of Community College Chairs

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CULTIVATING LEADERS:

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT NEEDS OF COMMUNITY COLLEGE CHAIRS

by

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ABSTRACT

Higher education is currently experiencing industry changes that make good leadership even more crucial. However, most academic leaders arrive at their first leadership position with no leadership training and find the transition challenging. The purpose of this phenomenological study is to examine the lived experiences of community college chairs in relation to leadership development practices. The research questions that drive this study are (a) What competencies/skills are needed for performing the department chair role? (b) What are the professional development needs of community college department chairs? (c) What types of professional development do department chairs find most valuable? (d) What types of professional leadership development are most often offered to community college chairs?

Participants are all current department chairs at one medium-sized community college in the mid-Atlantic region. Participants volunteered to share their experiences through semi-structured interviews, transcripts of which were then analyzed for thematic and experiential commonalities. Analysis of the findings revealed that chairs had very little development offered to them that specifically addressed their duties as department chair. The participants were frustrated at the lack of information they had about the processes involved with their day-to-day responsibilities. Participants were interested in continually learning to more effectively and independently do their jobs, and participants were confident in their ability to handle the teaching

and learning aspects of their work. Overall the strongest development opportunities that resonated with the participants were ones where they were able to collaborate, find camaraderie and support, and build a broader leadership network.

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Table of Contents

LIST OF TABLES

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Leadership is vital. Good leaders bring out the strengths and talents of their employees (Kouzes & Posner, 2015), grow their people's confidence, and help them to improve their performance and satisfaction in their work. Leadership impacts employees' commitment to their work and to the organization and inspires employees to demonstrate more initiative and personal responsibility (Kouzes & Posner, 2015). Such leadership is crucial to any organization but has particular significance when the institution or industry is in flux.

Higher education is in such a state of transition. Perspectives on the goals of higher education are shifting—people are leaning more toward college as an individual benefit rather than a public good. While higher education and degree attainment have traditionally been viewed as a step toward future career success, given the rise in costs of a college education, many people are becoming wary of the value of college (Kelderman, 2019; Mangan, 2019). The rate of inflation for college costs is rising quickly (Seltzer, 2017). State funding for public institutions remains well below pre-recession levels (State Higher Education Officers Association, 2019), and colleges are struggling to make up the difference. College enrollment has been dropping (Fain, 2019). According to the Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education (WICHE), after 15 years of increases in the number of high school graduates, high school and college enrollments are projected to decrease through 2023, rebound slightly, and then decrease again from 2027 to 2032 (Seltzer, 2016). With the high level of change facing higher education, strong leadership throughout the institution becomes crucial (Jäppinen, 2017).

Leaders in community colleges in particular are facing a changing landscape of reduced funding, increased questions about value, and a questioning of the higher education business model, which reflects a shift from full-time to a larger ratio of adjunct faculty (Peterson &

Rudgers, 2018; Rudgers & Peterson, 2017). The reduction in budget has pushed many colleges to reduce the number of full-time faculty and rely more on adjuncts to teach classes (American Association of University Professors, 2018). According to AAUP (2018), over 60% of faculty at two-year/Associates degree schools are part-time, non-tenure-track. The Government Accountability Office (GAO) published a study that noted that from 1995 to 2011, the percentage of postsecondary instructional positions filled by contingent faculty (part-time or short-term contractual) increased from 57.6% to 71.6% (GAO, 2017). This shift from full-time faculty to high numbers of adjuncts means there is a need for additional resources to assist mid-level leaders in consistently reaching out to adjuncts, assisting adjuncts in navigating challenges, and developing additional skills (Meixner, Kruck, & Madden, 2010).

The role of the department chair is key in terms of the smooth functioning of a college (Carroll & Wolverton, 2004); conversely, most higher education administrators come to their positions with very little leadership training. Wolverton, Ackerman, and Holt (2005) noted that in a national survey of 2,000 academic leaders, only 3% had any type of leadership preparation before assuming their leadership position. According to Morris and Laipple (2015), administrators felt unprepared for their roles and have steadily lost enthusiasm for their work the longer they are in the positions. Morris and Laipple's study highlighted the administrators' need for preparation for management and leadership tasks, as well as continued support once in the leadership position.

Kouzes and Posner (2015) suggest that exemplary leadership comes down to individuals having faith in their ability to lead; to consciously choose to learn, practice, and grow their skills; and to work and engage with others. College leaders themselves noted that they need training and skills to more effectively complete their jobs, and they were able to identify key areas where

skill improvement would directly strengthen their role as leaders. Clear communication, goal-setting, and problem-solving were commonly found as needed leadership traits (Delgado & Mitchell, 2016; Kalargyrou & Woods, 2009; Tessen, White, & Web, 2011).

Within the community college sector, Campbell, Syed, and Morris (2010) noted that formal degree-based community college leadership programs focus on the following: (a) the essential components of practical leadership, such as finance and policy, (b) inquiry-based rationale building, and (c) development of interpersonal competencies through personality and work-style profiling. However, it was noted that there is traditionally little opportunity to put what was learned directly into practice and develop these skills though regular work and experience.

At Mid-Atlantic Suburban Community College (MASCC), the current structure of department chairs and deans has been in place for only six years—a situation favorable for collecting data on the development needs and experiences of chairs. This study will examine the development experiences of department chairs and the training methods and techniques that had the most impact. Current leaders can use the results of this study to strengthen leadership development; provide appropriate support for leaders already in positions of responsibility; and change college culture, particularly in regard to the relative newness of chair positions.

Statement of the Problem

With the rapid and profound changes in the higher education environment, strong and agile leadership is becoming even more important to the effectiveness of a college (Smith & Hughey, 2006). Good leaders bring out the best in those they lead, and bring energy and motivation to an organization (Kouzes & Posner, 2012). Beyond the overall health of the organization, leadership has a key impact on the institutional dynamics that help students'

learning and success (Jäppinen, 2017). Unfortunately, in higher education most leaders begin their leadership positions with little to no leadership preparation or training (Hecht, 2004; Parrish, 2015; Wolverton, Ackerman, & Holt, 2005).

While there has been research on the needs of high-level leaders in colleges—such as presidents or members of the board of trustees—there has been very little research on the leadership development needs and experiences of mid-level leaders. This is particularly true of department chairs, who have a critical role in the smooth functioning of an institution and are considered to be key day-to-day decision makers (Carroll & Wolverton, 2004; Gmelch & Miskin, 2011). Department chairs need timely, appropriate, and well-tailored leadership training as they both assume and continue in their leadership roles. With the distinct lack of leadership training before assuming the department chair position, many chairs learn on the job and through a random collection of experiences (Smith & Hughey, 2006). Department chairs are often not given initial training and support, which can hamper the work of the institution (Carroll & Wolverton, 2004; Gmelch & Buller, 2015). Given the evolving climate for higher education and lack of training for rising leaders, leadership development for department chairs should be a priority for any higher education institution (Gmelch & Miskin, 2011). Department chairs with little to no access to leadership development opportunities are at risk of dissatisfaction and frustration with the position, which could lead to a negative impact on the functioning of the college (Jäppinen, 2017; Morris & Laipple, 2015).

Without adequate preparation for their leadership roles, chairs are left to learn and fend for themselves. This extends their learning curve and increases their challenges, reducing their efficacy in the early part of their service. When faced with situations for which they have not

been trained, chairs become frustrated and less invested in continuing their work as leaders (Floyd, 2016).

Without a true understanding of the needs of mid-level leaders, those needs are less likely to be purposefully met (Hecht, 2004). The aim of this study is to explore and understand the leadership development needs and experiences of community college department chairs. This phenomenological case study will primarily use interviews to gain in-depth insight into the common themes in the experiences and perceptions of chairs' leadership development. The data collected will be contextualized by comparing the common themes that emerge from the interviews with the leadership competencies identified by the American Association for Community Colleges.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to examine the lived experiences of department chairs at Mid-Atlantic Suburban Community College (MASCC) in relation to leadership development practices. The data collected from this study will provide a detailed guide, specific to MASCC, in what chairs feel they need to know to be better able to perform their roles. By closely examining how chairs experience the start of their roles as department leaders and how they have experienced professional development related to their new roles, the researcher can suggest how to strengthen development programs for the chair as leader. Leadership development programs can be developed that begin with a clear understanding of the needs of the institution, and then adapt successful practices used elsewhere to create a tailored development experience (Braun, et al., 2009; Gmelch & Buller, 2015). Agile and prepared leaders will provide a better working environment for faculty and a better learning environment for students (Jäppinen, 2017; Smith & Hughey, 2006).

Research Question

Much of the literature on community college leadership focuses on the role of the president, and the role of academic leadership preparation is comparatively less studied and more misunderstood (Gmelch & Buller, 2015). As noted in the research, the success of any leadership development effort hinges on the ability of the developers to meet the specific needs of both the leaders and the institution (Gmelch & Buller, 2014; Reille & Kezar, 2010; Sirkis, 2011). Using the American Association of Community Colleges (AACC) Competencies for Community College Leaders as a conceptual framework, this phenomenological case study examines the lived experience of academic department chairs in a community college and the extent to which leadership training influenced the leaders' perceived ability to perform their roles. The key research questions that guide this study are:

- What competencies/skills are needed for performing the department chair role?

- What are the professional development needs of community college department chairs?

- What types of professional development do department chairs find most valuable?

- What types of professional leadership development are most often offered to community college chairs?

Conceptual Framework

As the awareness of the need for leaders in higher education grew, AACC began to investigate and then create a list of the competencies such leadership positions would require. The original list of leadership competences was published in 2006 and has been used by a large number of community colleges as a basis for leadership preparation. This study uses the AACC Competencies for Community College Leaders as a conceptual framework. In their most recent iteration, the AACC identified 59 competencies as being necessary for community college

leaders (AACC, 2018). The competencies were then grouped into 11 leadership focus areas for ease of use, and each focus area has two to 11 specific competencies listed. The focus areas that define the categories of competencies include:

- Organizational Culture

- Governance, Institutional Policy, and Legislation

- Student Success

- Institutional Leadership

- Institutional Infrastructure

- Information and Analytics

- Advocacy and Mobilizing/Motivating Others

- Fundraising and Relationship Cultivation

- Communications

- Collaboration

- Personal Traits and Abilities (AAUP, 2018)

Detailed behavioral descriptions are provided for each competency and vary as appropriate to different levels of leadership—faculty, mid-level leaders, senior-level leaders, aspiring Chief Executive Officers (CEOs), new CEOs, and CEOs. For the purposes of this study, department chairs will be utilizing the mid-level leadership competencies, as they are no longer just faculty but not quite senior leadership. The previous incarnations of the AACC competencies have been widely researched, which validates their use for overall leadership development programs. However, most of the prior research focused on the competencies as they related to high-level leaders, particularly college presidents and boards of trustees, which leaves a gap in the literature relating to the use of these competencies for mid-level leaders. The creation of the

updated set of competencies and focus areas had wide participation and buy-in, yet the participants listed as part of the revision process were of the vice-president/president/board of trustees level. None of the groups listed as participating in the revision of these competencies appears to include mid-level leaders.

This study examined the most recent set of competencies and their applicability to mid-level leadership roles, particularly department chairs. The research developed a picture of the experiences and perceptions of current community college chairs through interviews. The findings will then be compared with the frequently used AACC framework.

Assumptions, Limitations, and Scope

Embracing the path of phenomenological inquiry, this study makes assumptions about the commonality of experience of community college chairs, assuming that commonalities exist and can be examined through the survey and interview process. Additionally, the researcher assumes that the department chairs participating in the study fit the most common model of department chair and bring very little leadership development experience to the position. Finally, the researcher assumes that the department chairs who participate in the study do so of their own free will, with their only motivation being to assist the researcher complete her study, and that they will respond honestly and to the best of their recollection.

The limitations of this study include the relatively recent adoption of the chair model at the research site and the related newness of the chairs in their positions. As MASCC adopted the department chair model in 2013, there is very little history for department chairs and their training. Furthermore, because leadership development programs should be tailored to the needs of specific institutions, results of this study may not be generalizable to other institutions.

Additional limitations include the small number of participants and that the study is being conducted at one community college at a set point in time.

Potential bias for this study might arise in the researcher's personal experiences as a community college chair. The researcher has a professional background in leadership and professional development, which might lead to a bias in favor of the need for training and development opportunities. Other biases may include that the researcher knows the participants and may have preconceived notions about the role of chair.

Significance

Higher education is a dynamic industry that needs leaders who are ready for the rapid challenges and changes faced on a regular basis; however, research has determined that most academic administrators do not feel prepared for their leadership roles and are becoming disenfranchised with their positions (Morris & Laipple, 2015; Wolverton et al., 2005). To thoroughly prepare leaders as they move into leadership positions—as well as provide continued support—leadership development programs need to know the characteristics and skills on which to focus. Past research notes that there are commonalities in the skills leaders want and need (Brown, Martinez, & Daniel, 2002; Campbell, Syed, & Morris, 2010; Delgado & Mitchell, 2010; Kalargyrou & Woods, 2009; Tessens, White, & Web, 2011).

Leadership can be broken down into a set of skills and behaviors that can be learned and developed, and the growth of these practices and the confidence in using them can lead to exemplary leaders (Kouzes & Posner, 2015). This study serves as a starting point for the practitioner in terms of evaluating existing leadership programs, potentially developing new leadership programs, and matching training with needed skills.

This study will begin to fill the gap in the research on mid-level leaders in higher education (Floyd, 2016; Thorpe & Garside, 2017). The results of this study will be significant for the participating institution, MASCC, in identifying potential leadership development needs and opportunities. The study is significant for the participants, as the results can help with individual needs analysis and development goals. Individual leaders can compare their strengths with the identified skills needed to assist in setting clear, specific leadership goals. This study might also be significant for the faculty supervised by department chairs and the students at the college whose educational experience is directly impacted by the smooth functioning of the school.

Definition of Terms

Academic Leader—In higher education, an academic leader is one who oversees faculty or reports through the vice president of academic affairs or provost or equivalent (Gmelch & Miskin, 2011).

Adjunct faculty—Adjunct faculty are faculty members who are hired in part-time, course-specific contracts, and are considered temporary employees (MASCC Adjunct Handbook, 2019).

Dean—For this study, a dean is an academic administrator who oversees a group of academic departments and has a more strategic role in managing curriculum, resources, upper administration, and external constituents. Generally, department chairs report directly to deans (Montez, Wolverton, & Gmelch, 2003).

Department Chair—A department chair is a faculty member who leads a larger department, which can comprise one discipline or a combination of disciplines (Gmelch & Miskin, 2011).

Full-time faculty—Full-time faculty are faculty who teach a full-time, 30-credit annual course load, and are continuing employees (MASCC Faculty Handbook, 2019).

Mid-level academic leaders—For this study, mid-level academic leaders at MASCC are defined as department chairs, although the research does occasionally include course coordinators and associate deans (Gmelch & Miskin, 2011).

Professional Development—Professional development is specialized training or learning intended to help an individual hone and update the skills and knowledge needed to do his or her job successfully, as well as to prepare the individual for the next possible position (Chu, 2012).

Conclusion

Leadership is both integral to the success of an organization and a key indicator of the values of an organization (Carroll & Wolverton, 2004; Jäppinen, 2017). Higher education is in a state of rapid and sometimes dramatic change. Leaders in higher education beginning their leadership roles present an opportunity to receive training and support that is not being utilized— and that could help them be successful as academic leaders (Brown et al., 2002; Campbell, Syed, & Morris, 2010; Delgado & Mitchell, 2010; Kalargyrou & Woods, 2009; Tessens et al., 2011).

This study will add to the literature in the field by examining the lived experience of the department chairs in regard to what chairs need to know as leaders, what they need to be able to do, and how prepared they feel for their roles. Additional analysis investigated how leaders perceive the importance of the leadership competencies recommended by the AACC and if any of the competencies are directly applicable for mid-level leaders. The findings will help to guide future leadership training programs, particularly for community colleges, as well as help MASCC align its vision for academic leadership with its emphasis on leadership training. The following chapters will review the literature on leadership development and the role of the

department chair, and then explain in detail the phenomenological methodology used for conducting this study.

CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Higher education needs leaders who can handle the changing landscape of reduced funding, increased assessment demands, and a shift from full-time to adjunct faculty. These constraints are hitting community colleges with particular force (Smith, 2018). Many academic leaders are promoted to positions of leadership because of academic excellence and with very little leadership preparation (Braun, et al., 2009; Hecht, 2004; Parrish, 2015). When faced with the high cost and generalized content of external leadership programs, many colleges are creating their own leadership development program (Sirkis, 2011). This researcher evaluated the lived experience of community college chairs and how they were or were not trained for their positions. The study will provide a strong basis for the evaluation and strengthening of in-place leadership development programs, as well as needed information for those looking to create such programs.

This literature review highlights approaches to examining important leadership characteristics and roles and documents previously identified leadership development best practices. The literature has clarified the approach to this study of community college leadership competencies and has created a conceptual framework for the next research step. The literature review examines the leadership dynamic in the current higher education climate, the challenges of development for academic leaders, and the specific needs of academic leaders. This provides a foundation for a more in-depth look at what academic leaders should be trained in and how such training could be produced.

Importance of Leadership

The importance of leadership has been a growing area of research for the last few decades, finding that leadership impacts the success and morale of both organization and the

individual employees (Kouzes & Posner, 2016). Good leaders bring out the strengths and talents of their employees. Good leaders grow their people's confidence and help them to improve their performance and satisfaction in their work. Good leaders impact people's commitment to their work and to the organization, with employees taking on more initiative and personal responsibility. Within schools themselves, students react very positively to teachers who demonstrate good leadership practices in the classroom.

Leadership can be broken down into a set of skills—behaviors that can be learned and developed (Kouzes & Posner, 2016). The growth of these practices and the confidence in using them can lead to exemplary leaders. Kouzes and Posner (2016) suggest that exemplary leadership comes down to individuals having faith in their ability to lead; to consciously choose to learn, practice, and grow their skills; and to work and engage with others. While individual application might differ based on the attributes that make leaders unique, good leaders consistently demonstrate the impactful leadership practices more often than poor leaders.

Leadership research consistently notes that the identification of oneself as a leader increases motivation to seek out leadership development and leadership experience (Chrobot-Mason, Gerbasi, & Cullen-Lester, 2016; Kouzes & Posner, 2016). This finding points to having leadership development include work to help leaders truly see themselves as such. While the self-identification of oneself as a leader starts with the individual perspective, it is solidified as others then treat the individual as a leader. As the leader gains experience, he or she moves from a focus on individual identity as a leader to a collective identity, building relationships and connecting with the larger team and organization. Leadership development should include building relationships within the organization, as well as developing a sense of collective identity.

As our understanding of leadership grows, the models of successful leadership become more complex and expand from a simple role-based authority to a view that leadership also entails relationships, influence in multiple directions, a more collaborative approach, and an understanding of the role of collective leadership (Day & Harrison, 2007). As challenges grow in complexity, leadership needs to grow beyond a series of individual leaders and expand into a more collaborative network of leadership. Leadership is no longer seen as the domain of one person in a hierarchical structure, but as a series of relationships and collaborative processes (Day & Harrison, 2007). Leadership is about social influence, which is not always connected to formal leadership positions (Ruben, De Lisi, & Gigliotti, 2018). Leadership—without the limitation of being connected to a certain person—can be defined as a series of processes that bring a group direction, alignment, and commitment to achieve collaborative goals (Day & Harrison, 2007).

Desired Leadership Skills for Academic Leaders

A number of studies have identified important characteristics of leaders in higher education. While each study approached the topic from a different angle, several common characteristics rose to the top, most notably communicating well, setting clear strategic goals, and building relationships (Basham & Campbell, 2010; Cipriano & Riccardi, 2017; Cleverley-Thompson, 2016; Delgado & Mitchell, 2016; Hempsall, 2014; Kalargyrou & Woods, 2009; Kotter, 2012; Parrish, 2015; Sirkis, 2011).

Cleverley-Thompson (2016) proposed that entrepreneurial characteristics are needed in the current higher education climate and would be ideal for tackling large-scale issues such as increasing competition for students given the decreasing pool of high school graduates and increasing use of technology. Cleverly-Thompson (2016) conducted a survey of deans at

independent 4-year schools in upstate New York to discover the characteristics most valued in school leadership. Respondents reported team building and proactive leadership as the highest rated characteristics and risk-taking as the lowest rated characteristic.

Delgado and Mitchell (2016) used a survey of nursing faculty to identify leadership qualities. That study identified integrity, clarity of communication, and problem-solving ability as the characteristics that ranked as most important. After conducting interviews in three countries, Hempsall (2014) summarized the findings to a focus on leaders emphasizing maintaining relationships, thinking clearly about the strategy behind the work, and putting effort into getting the work itself done. Kalargyrou and Woods (2009) identified characteristics of leadership in a hospitality education program. The common skills identified by both the administrators and faculty included communication skills, fundraising skills, and clear goal-setting (Kalargyrou & Woods, 2009).

While focusing on the emotional intelligence of leaders, Parrish (2015) noted that the top characteristics in terms of importance were empathy and the ability to inspire and guide others. The ability to manage one's own emotions as well as the emotions of others is also seen as a valued leadership skill (Parrish, 2015). Higher education leaders do not often have training in emotional intelligence and could benefit from the inclusion of emotional intelligence skills as part of their leadership approach. These specific skills would include regulating and managing emotions, expressing emotions, understanding how emotions facilitate thinking, and analyzing emotions (Parrish, 2015).

Through a comprehensive literature review, Sirkis (2011) identified building relationships and networks and advocating for faculty as the top needed competencies. Kotter (2012), while discussing an eight-step change process, focused on strategy, relationships and

communication, and accomplishing the core tasks of the job. This research into necessary leadership characteristics has consistently found that leaders need communication skills, relational skills, and strategic awareness.

Leadership Development Practices

Training for community college leadership positions has been seen as a rather dichotomous situation, with opportunities being provided by large, expensive external programs or small, inexpensive, internal programs (Forthun & Freeman, 2017). While there are privately run leadership training programs and conferences, the two major sources of leadership training have been community college leadership doctoral programs and "grow-your-own" training programs. However, there is very little consistency between programs in terms of content and format (Forthun & Freeman, 2017). Many schools chose to create their own leadership programs to fill their internal leadership needs, yet these "grow-your-own" programs also lack consistency and are frequently based on the interests of the individuals or departments charged with creating them (Gmelch & Buller, 2015). In 2006 the AACC stepped in to create a series of community college leadership competencies; however, with no industry-wide process for creating programs, most doctoral programs and "grow your own" programs did not specifically address the competencies in their curriculum (Forthun & Freeman, 2017).

While studies reported leaders having insufficient training before assuming a leadership role, several studies address the ways professional development can be structured to have a substantial impact. Some development opportunities did not precede the leadership role but were conducted after the leadership role was taken on. While a number of development methods were noted as being useful, experiential learning was identified across studies as most helpful to leaders (Day, 2001; Delgado & Mitchell, 2016; Gmelch & Buller, 2015; Hempsall, 2014;

Preston & Floyd, 2016). National and regional leadership training opportunities do exist (for example, the annual Academic Chairpersons Conference); however, such programs are expensive and provide only short-term training experiences. Many institutions create their own leadership programs, with mixed results (Gmelch & Buller, 2015; Reille & Kezar, 2010). Reille and Kezar (2010) reported that grow-your-own leadership development programs tended to be based on an individual's idea of what was important for leadership, not necessarily the clearly identified needs of the organization. They recommend a careful needs assessment to identify the needs of the development program, as well as the best practices.

Leader development and leadership development can be differentiated, with leader development focusing on the individual skills and attributes of a leader, and leadership development focusing on the social and organizational dynamics required of a leader (Day, 2001). While short-term workshops and trainings assist in providing position-specific management or administrative skills, more extended development opportunities are needed to provide leaders with a chance to build networks, reflect, and learn new ways of thinking from one another (Day 2011; Thorpe & Garside, 2017; Wells & Herie, 2017). Despite the importance of such reflective interactions, chairs have very few opportunities to connect with one another (Wells & Herie, 2017). Delgado and Mitchell (2016) reported that respondents said their most useful leadership training came from mentoring (53.5%) and on-the-job experience (30.2%). Mentoring and internal coaching help leaders develop the learned skills in their everyday work and complement the leadership development program in creating transformative learning experiences (Ciporen, 2010).

Preston and Floyd (2016) also reported that respondents found experiential training and networking with others in the same position to be the most useful. The study noted that most

training was based on processes and was not considered useful—individuals in the positions wanted training on the role itself, not just general managerial theory (Preston & Floyd, 2016). Tessens et al. (2011) also noted that participants recommended that leadership development include mentoring, coaching, and 360-degree feedback. Leadership development programs need to be firmly rooted in the culture and mission of the organization and should have a focus on experiential learning (Day, 2001; Gmelch & Buller, 2015; Hempsall, 2014).

A focus on the socialization needs of leaders also proved to be valuable in development programs. In a review of their recently implemented program, Ruben, De Lisi, and Gigliotti (2018) found that participants needed not only leadership or management knowledge to wield power, but also a better understanding of the role of leadership, the importance of strategic communication, and the challenges of leadership in higher education. Lee and Corrao (2011) found that bringing together faculty leaders across disciplines produced strides in creating a common language and allowing larger but common issues to be addressed. Pathways for future interdisciplinary projects were opened in addition to improving an individual's leadership capacity.

The Impact of Leadership Development

While there has been a significant focus on leadership development, much less research has been conducted on the overall impact of leadership development (Sørensen, 2017). Although some studies note positive correlations of leadership skills and internal outcomes after participation in programs, most note in any discussion of outcomes that such things are very challenging to measure (Dobsen, et al, 2018). Gmelch and Buller (2015) note that without appropriate training, academic leaders are at a disadvantage. Without being familiar with policy and regulations, poor decisions can put both the leader and the institution at risk. Additionally,

individual careers can be negatively impacted if a leader assumes a leadership position and is unsuccessful due to lack of preparation (Gmelch & Buller, 2015).

Management literature notes the increase in transformational leadership characteristics after participants completed a leadership development program (Brown & May, 2012). Transformational leadership has been seen as a positive factor in organizational effectiveness (Bass, 2008; Brown & May, 2012). However, there is a lack of literature on the impact of leadership training on the behaviors of the leaders and the outcomes of the organizations (Brown & May, 2012). Brown and May (2012) conducted a study of a leadership training program in a manufacturing organization that focused on awareness, feedback, planning, and application. After the intensive year-long development program, the study found significant increases in contingent reward and transformational leadership behaviors among supervisors. Transformational leadership behaviors were also correlated to increases in productivity and satisfaction with supervision (Brown & May, 2012). Transformational leadership has been acknowledged as a good fit for higher education (Bass, 2008), and while the business of education is very different from manufacturing, the connection between leadership training and positive organizational outcomes provides a basis for the argument of the potential positive impact of purposeful leadership training programs.

Industry Challenges in Higher Education

Higher education has been under a high level of scrutiny in recent years and has dealt with a number of challenges from the current political climate (Peterson & Rudgers, 2018; Rudgers & Peterson, 2017). Brinkley-Etzkorn and Lane (2019) noted "Higher education exists in an age of increased criticism, constrained resources, and a changing educational landscape in terms of increased institutional competition, the student population, and faculty and tenure

issues" (p. 572). Colleges and universities are competing with fewer resources and for a more discriminating clientele. Institutions are expected to provide a wider variety of services than even 30 years ago—from academic support and tutoring to mental health services—and the industry is wrestling with the false dichotomy of focusing on either career preparation or liberal education (Floyd, 2016).

As the landscape gets increasingly complicated, leaders need to deal with the challenges in new ways (Massaro, 2011; Middlehurst, 2008; Preston & Floyd, 2016). Leadership is not a linear role, and every situation requires analysis of context, strategy, and relationships (Middlehurst, 2008). Preston and Floyd (2016) noted that as higher education is becoming increasingly complex, roles such as the associate dean are being created to accommodate increased workload but without clarity on the distinguishing characteristics of the position and without adequate training. While high-level leadership roles mirror those in non-educational organizations, mid-level academic leaders have a unique and complex role—combining administrative tasks with academic work, in addition to supervising and evaluating while maintaining the persona of a peer (Rowley & Sherman, 2003). With the increase in complexity of the industry, the scope of work and needed knowledge for leaders has also increased, and strong leadership has never been more important (Smith & Hughey, 2006).

How Leaders in Higher Education Respond to Challenges

Given the increasing complexity of the higher education industry and the many roles and needs of community colleges, leaders must take on more adaptive forms of leadership, as opposed to the entrenched ideas of a traditional bureaucracy (Davis, Dent, & Wharff, 2015). Traditional hierarchical leadership practices are beginning to give way to the more transformational leadership practices more commonly used in contemporary community colleges

(Eddy, 2010). Recent research examined the practices that are most often highlighted in the literature as being used and as being championed for community colleges. The themes Davis, Dent, and Wharff (2015) identified as being most useful for community college leaders were a clear focus on discovery of the values and parameters before taking action; framing the interpretations involved and structuring the framework for change; and engaging all stakeholders in action steps while emphasizing communication and collaboration. Tarker (2019) examined the last several years of community college leadership literature and identified five prevailing themes. While overlapping with the tenets of transformational leadership, the themes that stood out independently were engaging in change and innovation, transforming culture to focus on student success, articulating a vision, creating a learning organization, and practicing ethical leadership (Tarker, 2019).

Lack of Preparation for Mid-Level Leaders/Chairs

While the business world has researched and developed leadership training, higher education is not keeping pace (Braun, et al., 2009), and higher education leaders receive little to no preparation before finding themselves in leadership roles (Chu, 2012; Floyd, 2016; Morris & Laipple, 2015; Preston & Floyd, 2016; Ruben, De Lisi, & Gigliotti, 2018; Sirkis, 2011). The role of a faculty member and the role of a department chair are very different and require different skillsets (Massaro, 2011). Faculty are expected to work independently and are rewarded for individual achievements. Department chairs must communicate regularly, build group cohesion and consensus, and are rewarded based on the functioning of the group (Massaro, 2011). In a survey of academic leaders, Morris and Laipple (2015) found that academic administrators felt they were least prepared in the areas of generating entrepreneurial revenue, tracking employee progress, and handling grievances. Respondents also felt notably less skilled in the areas of

inspiring others, being someone others want to follow, and addressing poor performance (Morris & Laipple, 2015). Faculty do not receive training either before or as they are taking on leadership roles, and they are frustrated by this lack (Floyd, 2016). These findings align with the experiences administrators have as faculty—they are rarely required to handle these types of tasks before they are in a leadership position.

The lack of leadership training is not limited to chairs. Preston and Floyd (2016) noted most associate deans are promoted with no previous leadership training, and once in the position find experiential training and networking with others in the same position to be the most useful. What little training was done was based on processes and was not considered useful, and individuals in the positions wanted training on the role itself, not just general managerial theory (Preston & Floyd, 2016). Sirkis (2011) discussed the need for training for community college department chairs and how most chairs do not consciously set out to take on a leadership role. Instead, they find their success in teaching or research often results in roles leading others, which requires a very different skillset. With a wide variety of roles and responsibilities coupled with the lack of preparation, academic leaders describe their daily work as being akin to "trying to nail jelly to the ceiling while putting out spot fires with one's feet" (Bolman & Gallos, 2011).

The Role of Mid-Level Academic Leaders

Department chairs are frequently an introductory leadership position and are a buffer between the faculty and the administration (Hecht, 2004). Gmelch and Miskin (2011) note that it is commonly thought that 80% of decisions are made at the department chair level (p. 5). With the challenges in the industry, chairs are even more on the front lines as key decision makers (Chu, 2012). Even with that level of responsibility, very few chairs receive any leadership training before assuming the chair position (Gmelch & Miskin, 2011; Hecht, 2004; Sirkis, 2011;

Wolverton et al., 2005). Some chairs take on the role with little interest in leadership but view taking the position as helping the department or taking their turn as chair (Braun, et al., 2009; Chu, 2012; Rowley & Sherman, 2003). Chairs have a variety of responsibilities, including that of leader, scholar, faculty developer, and manager, that differ from their faculty experiences (Gmelch & Miskin, 2011). Department chairs must be managers and leaders of very independent people, while also regularly problem-solving and handling both small and large administrative tasks. Chairs are the buffer between the senior leadership and the on-the-ground faculty (Thorpe & Garside, 2017). Additionally, department chairs frequently try to maintain their independent work as faculty with the intention of returning to strictly faculty ranks (Wolverton et al., 2005).

With so little preparation and so many competing requirements, chairs consider their positions to be frustrating and describe being pulled in many directions while dealing with competing priorities (Floyd, 2016; Wolverton et al., 2005). Cipriano and Riccardi (2017) note that chairs' top challenges include dealing with troublesome faculty members and addressing bureaucracy, emphasizing the push-pull dichotomy of the position. Department chairs find themselves needing to advocate for their faculty up the chain of command, as well as protect their faculty from the demands of administration (Wolverton et al., 2005).

With the steep learning curve department chairs face, Morris and Laipple (2015) found academic administrators reported a decrease in interest and enthusiasm since starting their administrative position. However, along with the frustration, experience did also bring a change and growth in perspective. Sypawka, Mallett, and McFadden (2010) found that as academic administrators spent time in their roles, they began to use multiple frames of reference for viewing challenges. Even with growth within the position, research shows half of all chairs turn over every three to six years (Chu, 2012).

While the role of scholar is considered less of a responsibility at a community college, McArthur (2002) notes that department chairs at community colleges are more likely to oversee departments made of different disciplines brought together for administrative reasons, which makes their ability to empower and develop faculty even more important. There is a need to differentiate between administrative training on how to do a task and overall professional development focusing on growth and leadership skills (Gmelch & Miskin, 2011; Hecht, 2004; Wolverton et al., 2005; Sirkis, 2011).

Importance of Leadership Development

As research acknowledges that leadership plays a vital role in any organization, the work of purposefully developing leaders garners more attention. Most leadership development focuses more on the skills and behaviors of a leader as an individual; however, true leadership development must include a focus on the systems and interpersonal relationships that make up the leader's influence (Day & Harrison, 2007). Relationships between individuals, not just the individuals themselves, help build the shared experiences of organizational leadership. A focus on leadership as a collaborative task includes the fundamental responsibilities of setting direction for, building commitment to, and aligning with key organizational goals (Day & Harrison, 2007). When recognizing the importance of social identity in leadership, the authors recommend a development program that takes leaders through a process of understanding the importance of groups and organizational identity, reflecting on and identifying the group traits and areas for growth, clarifying the values and work of the group, setting goals and implementing strategies to achieve the work of the group, and tracking the progress of the work of the group (Hallam, et al, 2017). This series of steps enhances the effectiveness of the leader and recognizes the inherent importance of the group dynamics (Hallam, et al, 2017).

Leadership development is valuable for the impact on individual skills, as well as the impact of creating social networks. Purposeful training and development complement natural training provided by one's own experiences (Ruben, De Lisi, & Gigliotti, 2018). Community college leaders have noted that, while their leadership experience is valuable for approaching and understanding a new situation, the more formal training experiences gave them broader insight as to why they needed to make the choices they did and provided the socialization to understand and learn from how other leaders have faced similar situations (Eddy, 2010). Formal leadership development should include a focus on both horizontal and vertical skills: vertical skills are specific to the discipline, while broader horizontal skills transcend discipline and are applicable to any number of positions (Ruben, De Lisi, & Gigliotti, 2018). Leadership development provides opportunities for leaders to reflect on their leadership decisions, connect how they made their decisions, and assess the impact those decisions had on others (Eddy, 2010).

Conceptual Framework

While many studies created their own lists of desired characteristics and competencies with much conceptual overlap, the AACC competencies provide a commonly used framework for continued investigations into the development needs of academic leaders. Forthun and Sydney (2017) noted that many leadership development programs created for community college leaders use the AACC's leadership competencies as a guide. These competencies were developed after a series of leadership conferences and a survey in 2003-2004 (Boswell & Imroz, 2012). The initial document was published in 2005 and consisted of six main competencies: organizational strategy, resource management, communication, collaboration, community college advocacy, and professionalism. Within each competency are more detailed explanations and characteristics (AACC, 2016).

Several studies have been conducted to examine the AACC leadership competencies and how they align with the perceptions of community college leaders (Boswell & Imroz, 2013; Duree & Ebbers, 2012; Eddy, 2012; Hassan, Dellow, & Jackson, 2009; McNair, 2009). However, these studies focused on presidents, boards of trustees, department chairs, and vice presidents. There was very little inclusion of mid-level academic leaders such as department chairs in the research.

In 2018 the AACC published a revised set of competencies for community college leaders (AACC, 2018). From the original six, the AACC expanded to 11 competency focus areas, and each focus area has between two and eight competencies. Each key competency is supported by a behavioral statement connected to the appropriate leadership level: faculty, mid-level leaders, senior-level leaders, aspiring CEOs, new CEOs, and CEOs. The competencies were revised through the work of a number of senior leaders, including community college CEOs and vice presidents, AACC board of directors, directors of community college doctoral programs, and participants in the AACC Presidents Academy Summer Institute (AACC, 2018, p. 3). While additional specifics are unavailable, there appear to be very few mid-level leaders considered in the creation of these competency lists. The full list of competencies can be found in Appendix A.

The first few competency focus areas emphasize the need to understand organizational culture, the way the organization is governed internally, how the organization creates policies and procedures, and the role legislation plays in how the institution functions (AACC, 2018). Legislation, internal policies, and organizational culture set the parameters for what is and is not possible to do. Without understanding legal or policy parameters, a leader will be limited in his or her ability to innovate or encourage change (Buller, 2012; Hecht, 2004).

The next few competency focus areas examine student success and building a student-centered institution (AACC, 2018). Community colleges in particular have a singular mission, and open access requires tremendous focus on the support needed for student success. A leader must know how to set focused goals, build teams and a collaborative environment to work toward goals, use assessments to gauge the effectiveness of programs and initiatives, and be ready to innovate to help students achieve their academic goals (Hecht, 2004; Wells & Herie, 2017).

From a practical standpoint, the next focus areas place emphasis on knowing how the institution is run—from budgeting and resource management, to accreditation, to the college's strategic planning process (AACC, 2018). Data needs to be collected, understood, and utilized to make progress on departmental and institutional goals. In times of shrinking budgets, resource management is particularly important in a leader (Buller, 2012; Chu, 2012; Gmelch & Miskin, 2011; Hecht, 2004; Sirkis, 2011).

Moving into relationships, the next focus areas discuss the importance of advocating for the college mission and needs, building relationships in support of the goals of the college, and using those relationships to motivate others to support the college through collaborative or fiscal means (AACC, 2018). Collaboration in particular is a vital skill and part of the core of what a leader needs to accomplish goals in his or her position (Buller, 2012; Hecht, 2004; Kalargyrou & Woods, 2009; Sirkis, 2011). Successfully working with others can be a hallmark of an impactful leader.

The last two focus areas emphasize individual attributes and relational skills. A leader is expected to successfully engage in both public and interpersonal communication and make connections as an articulate speaker and as an active listener (AACC, 2018). A leader is also

expected to demonstrate authenticity, a strong sense of ethics, courage, and organized work patterns, and to embrace change (AACC, 2018). Communication and the relationships that come from good communication skills are the most noted needs of a leader (Chu, 2012; Cipriano & Riccardi, 2017; Hempsall, 2014; Kalargyrou & Woods, 2009; Parrish, 2015; Sirkis, 2011; Wells & Herie, 2017; Wolverton, Ackerman, & Holt, 2005).

As these competencies were only released at the end of 2018, research into their applicability is not yet available; however, given the research history of the previous iterations of the competencies, the revised competencies still provide a useful base for additional research into more specific leadership competency needs.

This research study will use the revised AACC leadership competencies as a framework for examining the experiences of academic leaders in community colleges and determine how applicable these competencies are to specific mid-level academic leadership roles. Much of the research done examining the previous incarnation of the AACC competencies examined the applicability to presidents and high-level leaders. The leadership competencies appear to have been developed by groups representing high-level leaders (presidents, boards of trustees). While included on the list of leaders to which the competencies apply, no mid-level leader groups were listed as participating in the competency development. The lack of input from such a large group may call into question the applicability of the competencies for mid-level leaders, such as department chairs.

This study gathered information on what leaders perceive to be needed competencies for their role and also examine what academic affairs personnel see as important competencies for other mid-level leadership positions. The AACC competencies focused the research by providing already researched competencies and behavior statements for participants to identify. As

community colleges work to adapt to a changing environment, effective leadership is essential, and leadership development will be more powerful with a focus on the most impactful competencies.

Conclusion

With rapid changes in the higher education industry, responsive leadership is more important than ever. Research notes that most academic leaders are not trained to be leaders before accepting their first leadership position (Gmelch & Miskin, 2011; Morris & Laipple, 2015; Preston & Floyd, 2016; Sirkis, 2011; Wolverton et al., 2005). While most leaders take on their positions with little to no formal training, there are researched practices to use in the design of internal and regional programs (Delgado & Mitchell, 2016; Gmelch & Buller, 2015; Gmelch & Miskin 2011; Hempsall, 2014; Preston & Floyd, 2016; Sirkis, 2011). Leaders themselves have specific ideas of what they think would be useful in leadership training experiences (Cleverley-Thompson, 2016; Delgado & Mitchell, 2016; Hempsall, 2014; Kalargyrou & Woods, 2009; Kotter, 2012; Parrish, 2015; Sirkis, 2011). These ideas align with the literature on needed competencies for leaders. As leaders grow in their leadership roles, their needs for continued development and support also change (Sypawka et al., 2010). This review of literature provides a foundation for continued research into the experiences of academic leaders and how they identify the characteristics and training that would best assist them in their leadership positions.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

This phenomenological case study examined the professional development needs and experiences of department chairs in a Mid-Atlantic Suburban Community College. The process followed the phenomenological steps described by Moustakas (1994) and informed by the work of Van Manen (2014). The goal of phenomenology is to examine the lived experience and search for commonalities to better understand the root of that experience (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This study examined the experiences of community college chairs regarding their leadership training and leadership competencies. The theoretical framework for this study is the American Association of Community Colleges' (AACC) leadership competencies. The AACC has identified 11 competency focus areas valuable for community college leaders, with each focus area having between two and nine specific competencies, for a total of 59 competencies.

After collecting and analyzing the data, the findings were compared to the AACC competencies specified for mid-level leaders. The following questions are at the center of this research:

- What competencies/skills are needed for performing the department chair role?

- What are the professional development needs of community college department chairs?

- What types of professional development do department chairs find most valuable?

- What types of professional leadership development are most often offered to community college chairs?

Setting

This study took place at a Mid-Atlantic Suburban Community College with the pseudonym MASCC. MASCC is a public two-year institution founded in 1970. Located on a 119-acre campus, the college serves approximately 14,000 credit and 15,000 noncredit students

annually, representing 111 different countries. MASCC offers programs across a range of professional and general education disciplines, including substantial programs in health sciences, science and technology, social sciences and teacher education, business, computer systems, and arts and humanities. MASCC has 1,400 employees—200 are full-time credit faculty and another 640 are part-time credit faculty. Full-time faculty are expected to teach 30 credit hours per academic year, while part-time credit faculty are limited to 12 credits per semester up to a total of 24 credits annually.

MASCC is in its seventh year of the department chair model. Prior to the adoption of the department chair model, faculty reported to a division chair, which was more in line with a typical dean position. Each division chair had 20-40 direct reports, and this was found to be an unsustainable model. Department chairs are on three-year rotations, and the college has completed two cycles. Not all chair positions have turned over after the three-year cycle, although many have. The college, within a six-year period, has had between 30 and 45 faculty assume department chair leadership roles. With such a high number of new-to-position leaders, MASCC is a prime site for exploring chairs' development experiences and needs. The academic leadership at the college has been supportive of the study and allowed full access, hoping to use the insight garnered by the study for future professional development programs.

Participants/Sample

The study utilized a convenience sampling. An invitation to participate in an interview was sent electronically to all of the current academic department chairs, for a total population of 33. Follow-up invitations were sent to divisions that were not represented in the initial group of volunteers. Ten interviews were conducted, representing all seven divisions across Academic Affairs. The credentials of the individual faculty are discipline-specific. While most disciplines

require a minimum of a master's degree, some departments require professional credentials as a requirement for teaching.

The invitation to participate included a description of the research being conducted, the need for the interview to take place in a specific timeframe, the number of interview questions, and the approximate time needed to complete the interview. The consent form was included as part of the interview protocol. A statement of confidentiality indicated that all responses are confidential to the extent allowed by the study.

Data Collection Procedure

The invitation to participate was sent via site email to all active department chairs at MASCC soliciting interest in the study as well as division affiliation. A reminder email was sent one week after the initial email. Participants were chosen from the pool of volunteers to represent all seven divisions. Interviews were conducted in a neutral location—such as a private office onsite or a library meeting room—to maximize the convenience of the participants.

The interview protocol (Appendix B) was used for the semi-structured interviews and included basic demographic data, information on present position, and experience in an academic leadership position. The interview questions focused on asking participants for their experiences with professional development as community college department chairs and the need for leadership competencies. The interview protocol also asked participants to describe experiences as chair that illustrate the skills they have successfully used, as well as times where leadership skills were needed. Interviews were recorded and the audio was transcribed to provide a written record for analysis. Transcriptions were provided to participants for confirmation of accuracy. The researcher also took notes during the interview to record of-the-moment observations.

Analysis

After the interviews were conducted, the interview transcripts were used for analysis. To ensure accuracy of transcription, the initial interview transcripts were reviewed by the participants. Each phase of analysis used the appropriate method of coding, and codes were tracked in a spreadsheet to allow for additional large-scale examination (Saldaña, 2016). The first reading of the transcripts used holistic coding to identify initial descriptions of significant experiences. The second reading used pattern coding to identify specific commonalities within the individual's experiences, as well as across multiple participants' described experiences. Each reading also used emotion coding to identify descriptions that have strong emotional resonance.

Evaluation of the codes included holistic reading, selective reading, and detailed reading (Van Manen, 2014). Codes were analyzed and categorized according to commonalties across participants, as well as strong emotional resonance. Once categories had been identified, the categories were explored for themes (Saldaña, 2016). To ensure rigor, the results were read by at least two participants to ensure the accuracy of the data representation (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Participant Rights

All participation was confidential, and data was reported in aggregate form. If specific examples or quotes were used, all identifying details were changed. All participation in the study was voluntary and will only be known by the researcher, the dissertation committee, and the Institutional Review Board (IRB), if required. The study received IRB approval of the home institution, as well as the participation site. The researcher has completed the Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative (CITI) program. The researcher provided clear information on the purpose and process of the research and ensured confidentiality of the data to the extent allowed

by law. The audio recording and transcripts of the interviews are kept offsite in a cloud-based, password-protected account. The account includes an additionally password-protected folder for the participants' interviews. At any point, the participant was free to withdraw from the study. There was minimal risk to the participants. The researcher was alert to address any ethical concerns or considerations that arose during the study.

Limitations

One limitation of the study is the use of a convenience sampling. Because this qualitative study was set in one institution, the findings may not be generalizable to other institutions (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Additionally, the study focused on a small number of participants in a set point in time, which further limits its generalizability. There is also a limitation with the relative newness of the chair structure at the institution—experiences may not include any level of historical description. The institution has been making changes to processes that affect chairs, which might influence the perceived need for additional professional development. The researcher also works at the study site, which might cause some bias based on personal experience.

Conclusion

The focus of this phenomenological study is on department chairs' experiences of leadership development and leadership competencies. Semi-structured interviews were used to collect qualitative descriptions of individual leadership experiences, which were coded and then compared for overlapping themes. Bracketing was used extensively throughout the research process to limit bias in the analysis of the data. Once data had been analyzed for common themes, the results were compared again to the AACC leadership competencies. The results

provide a picture of the development needs and leadership experiences of department chairs, which will allow for further individual and institutional growth opportunities.

CHAPTER 4: RESULTS/OUTCOMES

This study was conducted by interviewing 10 department chairs over the course of four weeks in the fall of 2019. The department chairs ranged in tenure from 10 years directing a program (seven specifically as a department chair) to new department chairs in their first year. The chairs interviewed represented all seven divisions at the college (see Table 1). Each interview followed the set interview protocol. Interview questions were crafted to elicit not just thoughts about experiences but descriptions of experiences themselves. Interviews were recorded with the Rev.com application and then professionally transcribed. Transcripts were sent to each participant to confirm that the interview was accurate and to ask for any additional commentary. Once interview data were confirmed, transcripts were then coded.

Each transcript was read initially for global understanding, and then reread and primarily coded. Transcript data were analyzed for emergent codes and emotional codes. Codes and data were organized in a spreadsheet for secondary analysis, and then the codes were organized into themes, each of which was supported by both implicit and explicit experiences as described in the interviews. These themes combine to provide a nuanced picture of the experiences and current professional perspective of the participants. The findings guide the study toward recommendations and future research. This chapter provides a summary of the participants' experiences, describe in more detail the codes and themes, and provide quotes from the interviews to more clearly illustrate the participants' perspectives.

Table 1

Characteristics of Participant Sample

Category	Participants
Division	
Arts & Humanities	2
Business & Computer Systems	1
English & World Languages	1
Health Sciences	2
Mathematics	1
Science, Engineering, & Technology	2
Social Science & Teacher Education	1
Years as Department Chair	
1 year	2
2 years	2
3 years	1
4 years	2
7 years	2
Gender	
Female	8
Male	2
Education Level	
Master's Degree	7
Doctoral Degree	3
Chair Structure	
Rotating	8
Non-Rotating	2

Note. *Chair structure is seven years old*.

Summary of Findings

Each division appears to have a different process for choosing a department chair, specified by the Dean of that division. Six of the chairs participated in a more formal process where interested individuals were required to apply for the position and then go through an interview process. Four chairs described an internal process where after expressing interest, individuals were casually vetted and then offered the position. Within the professional program areas such as health sciences, chairs were generally hired into the position specifically to run the program and were hired through an external search process. If chairs were not hired directly into the chair position through an external search, they were pulled from full-time faculty and were considered to be on a rotating schedule where after their term was completed they would need to reapply if they were interested in continuing in the role.

After discussing the process of becoming a chair, participants were asked what interested them in becoming a chair. Four of the participants noted they stepped in because of a departmental need, and six chairs described a desire to contribute to the department. As Ann noted, "I was looking for a new challenge and this seemed like something I could contribute to." Of the 10 chairs interviewed, two originated the role of chair after the college's reorganization in 2013, and eight took over the chair role after the original chair stepped down. The length of service as a department chair varied from a full seven years to just a few months.

All of the chairs interviewed had some previous supervisory experience, mostly as coordinators in their current departments. All 10 chairs interviewed had at some point served as coordinators where they supervised adjunct faculty, as well as course and curriculum materials. At MASCC, coordinators generally handle the curriculum and staffing of courses or disciplines within a larger department. Several chairs of professional programs had industry leadership

experience before taking on a collegiate program leadership role, such as in a clinical setting where they supervised other health care professionals. One chair had extensive supervisory experience in business before a career change to teaching.

Very few of the interviewed participants had any targeted professional development before taking on the chair role. The professional development completed before taking on the chair role was either targeted to a previous position, self-directed, or general in nature. Much of the professional development was comprised of individual workshops and opportunities identified by the individual. As Gina noted,

> I'm a huge believer in continuing ed, so I've been taking so many different courses in management and leadership and consultantship and negotiating. Any outline of management that you can find, I've done each and everything that's been outlined. I've done much on my own. (Gina)

Several of the chairs completed the college-provided Excel leadership program before taking on the chair role, and those that did not complete the program before assuming the chair role completed the Excel program after becoming chair. The Excel leadership program is a college-wide cohort program that includes leaders and potential leaders from all areas of the college and focuses on non-academic managerial and leadership skills. All of the chairs noted that their participation in the program was valuable, particularly the networking and getting to know others across campus; however, all chairs noted that very little of the Excel program related specifically to their duties as academic chairs. Charles commented, "…taking it even as a chair I didn't think it was (a) robust enough professional development tool that really would have helped me in my role" (Charles). When asked about the leadership training program, Imelda observed, "It was good, but I'm not sure how practical it was in terms of what I would end up

doing as chair" (Imelda). Only one chair noted receiving training specifically in department chair duties before assuming the chair role. This participant was identified as the succeeding chair before the previous chair left the position, and she was able to work with the previous chair one-on-one before taking over the role. Quinn commented, "She did a really nice job writing up what should be done each month going along…she had everything very well organized" (Quinn).

Once taking on the chair role, some chairs noted they were provided casual division-based training and proactively took on additional independent training. Charles observed:

> This is what you have to do, figure out how to do it, I'm here to support you, but understand that this is under your purview, and it's your responsibility. If you don't know how to do it, find the resources, take the necessary development sessions, whatever it is that's available to you, but use those tools that we present to you in an institution and figure it out. It's not a handholding opportunity. ...So in spite of it not being a handhold, you aren't afraid to make a mistake, well, because in the end the support system was there. But nonetheless, you had to figure it out yourself. (Charles)

Within the last two years, MASCC provided one year-long training opportunity for all department chairs focused on coaching, although not all chairs were able to participate. When discussing the training on coaching, Ophelia commented, "But the really cool thing for me is just making a connection with another person and being able to interact with that person on a different level in the future when things come up" (Ophelia).

As a whole, chairs felt very comfortable with the educational aspects of their jobs. Mary observed, "I feel the curriculum development experiences, in the classroom, I'm very prepared for" (Mary). Participants were confident in their teaching, enjoyed mentoring other teachers, and were comfortable with their curriculum. Overall, they felt they knew how to proceed with

student or academic issues. All of the department chairs had extensive teaching experience and felt that experience prepared them well for dealing with issues related to teaching, learning, and students. Kristen noted, "I'm very good at diffusing student/instructor issues" (Kristen). A few chairs noted that the ability to manage their emotions was a strong positive factor in being able to problem-solve and maneuver through the bureaucracy. Imelda commented, "When things get challenging, I tend to get very calm. And I think that was something that was a big benefit to me, where I wasn't emotional when a lot of emotions came my way" (Imelda).

When asked about experiences where they did not feel they had what they needed, the answers varied in specifics but maintained certain commonalities. The specific answers included elements such as not having budget knowledge, needing clarity on legal policies and processes, and needing grant-writing assistance. The common theme across answers provided by all participants focused very strongly on needing information but not feeling they had access to the information they needed to do their jobs, not having guidelines for their own positions, and feeling like they are continually missing some of the facts of the situation or the context of a situation. The participating chairs felt very strongly that they were not provided with the information or the tools to get the appropriate information, to be able to best do their jobs. When asked about not having what she needed, Kristin noted, "I can only think of examples in terms of knowledge sharing. Where I felt that I didn't have the facts available to communicate to my department" (Kristen). Several chairs noted that when they took on the chair position, they were never told how to do many things, or even all of the duties they would be responsible for, but they were just expected to know, such as processes involving schedules and budget. Ophelia commented, "So actually most of the things that have gone wrong for me as a chair have been

because the communication has been unclear…where somebody thought someone else was doing it or someone else communicated something differently" (Ophelia).

Participants were asked directly what skills or competencies they thought chairs needed to be able to best do their jobs. Across all participants, the challenge of dealing with difficult people, communication skills, and dealing with difficult conversations were the most common responses. Gina noted:

One of the biggest aspects is that you have to sometimes have unpleasant conversations with faculty and staff. How do you do that? How do you promote that and still keep the team intact and happy and motivated and passionate about what they do? (Gina)

Most chairs also noted again how finding information is a key skill, although very specific to an individual institution. Kristen commented, "I think what they need is, people need to know where can I find answers, what are the procedures in certain situations" (Kristen). Time management and prioritization were also frequently noted as needed skills—not in terms of a general deficit but in noting that the workload of a department chair consists of so many different tasks and so many changing requests that prioritization and maintaining an efficient workflow is very difficult. Gina commented, "The skill would be organizational ability to meet deadlines and finish a task. That's huge" (Gina). Several participants noted that being proactive and managing both up and down the chain of command are skills helpful for the middle management chair role. Chairs were interested in knowing not only how to manage their faculty but also how to manage their supervisors. Participants also wanted to be able to get ahead of their work and not just feel as if they are reacting all the time. Gina also observed, "To recognize that issues could be erupting, to just be reactive is not a good idea. The person should have a skill, to be proactive."

Participants noted that professional development could be geared toward improving

communication and interactions, such as difficult conversations, conflict resolution, and how to

handle change. While very specific to an institution, chairs also put emphasis on the potential

benefit of professional development targeted toward internal processes, how to find information,

and understanding assessment initiatives. Gina mentioned, "Understanding what all the processes

are and that includes finances. The budget should be looked at by a chair or at least addressed.

Stewardship is huge" (Gina). Chairs noted the most valuable aspects of their professional

development experiences were networking among colleagues, having conversations that

explored situations with some depth, and reflecting on theirs and others' experiences.

Participants demonstrated strong interest in connection and learning from one another.

From a topical perspective, the most common themes for professional development needs

were dealing with difficult people and the need for more information about the position and

processes. Gina noted, "I would like to sit down in a group and be able to discuss what

responsibilities I as a chair or someone else has as a chair..." (Gina). These aspects appeared

repeatedly in various forms and across different types of questions. The most common area for

chairs' demonstrating confidence were discussions about tasks and responsibilities regarding

teaching. This included curriculum, onboarding of new faculty, and mentoring of other teachers.

There was an underlying frustration throughout all answers and, to some degree, across

all participants. While participants seemed content in their jobs and in their interest in making a

contribution, they keenly felt that they did not always have all the information they needed to be

able to do their jobs as well as they would like. All participants also mentioned in several places

throughout the interviews the interest and desire to connect with others to share information and

resources, and to feel a sense of camaraderie. Susan noted, "There are other surprising things that

come up that I really like to have someone to touch base with and say, what would be an approach I could take here, that would be powerful" (Susan). Chairs noted they had questions about the duties of the role and what makes a good chair. Gina commented, "How do I as a chair mentor? What does mentoring mean? What does coaching mean? What does counseling mean? What do those three things mean? I would like to see us tackle every aspect" (Gina).

Emergence of Themes

Several meaning units emerged through the coding and analysis, which were then collected into themes. The codes were grouped based on similar meaning and initial themes were identified. Transcripts were analyzed again with a focus on confirming the applicability of each theme with the raw data. Upon additional examination, these themes aligned with much of the literature reviewed early in the study. Specific quotes from participants are also used to illustrate the findings.

Table 2

Codes and Themes

Codes	Themes
Contribution Departmental Need	Desire to Contribute and be of Service
Educating Teaching Mentoring Problem Solving Curriculum	Confidence in Teaching and Learning Tasks
Ambiguity Frustration Lack of Information	Frustration with Ambiguity and Lack of Information
Difficult Conversations Emotional Intelligence	Desire for Development in Processes and Challenging Managerial Dynamics
Connection Community Networking Camaraderie	Strong Desire for Connection

Desire to contribute and be of service

Chairs took on the role of chair for a number of reasons, but two stood out as commonalities. The codes of *contribution* and *departmental need* occurred either separately or in combination in all of the interviews. Chairs identified wanting to make a *contribution* as a big part of stepping into the role. Several others stepped up to help fill a *departmental need*. This coincides with the literature review findings that note that department chairs frequently take on the role to be of assistance to the department (Braun, et al., 2009; Chu, 2012; Rowley & Sherman, 2003). Most participants came through the coordinator position and saw themselves as able to be of service to the department. Several chairs also noted a desire to take on more responsibility as part of personal ambition. Chairs in professional fields with extensive industry experience, as opposed to more traditional academic disciplines, were more likely to be hired directly to build and lead professional programs and were drawn to education by a desire to teach. Programs within Health Sciences often have external accreditation standards that require program/department chairs to have specific clinical experience.

The following quotes illustrate the codes of *contribution* and *departmental need* and highlight the theme *to be of service*:

I felt I was very confident being an instructor and professor, so I wanted to do something more to inspire others, to support others, help others to make a better impact (Mary).

So I thought why not do something to give back—to make an impact, make a difference, and be inspirational as well (Charles).

Even though it wasn't my first choice, honestly, I felt like I didn't want to let the folks down. I also felt like I had a really good group that I would enjoy managing and interacting with (Ophelia).

Confidence in teaching and learning tasks

Across the board, chairs were confident in their teaching ability and their ability to guide others in matters pertaining to teaching and learning. The codes *educating*, *teaching*, and *mentoring* occurred in connection with *problem solving* and *curriculum*. Their identities seemed rooted in their role as teacher, and their comfort with that role was evident. The chairs felt they had the tools to problem solve issues regarding pedagogy, their discipline, and mentoring other faculty in their teaching. Chairs are frequently chosen or identified as potential leaders due to excelling at their faculty responsibilities; however, faculty responsibilities are very different than those of a department chair (Gmelch & Miskin, 2011). Many chairs try to maintain close connections to their faculty duties, as they intend to return to faculty ranks after a time as chair (Wolverton et al., 2005). At community colleges in particular, the department chair might be overseeing a number of disciplines and the role of chair as mentor becomes even more important (McArthur, 2002). All of the participants rose to the chair role from the ranks of faculty and expressed confidence in their faculty expertise. Chairs in specific clinical programs were hired for their clinical expertise, but also had classroom experience that led them to want to work in education full-time.

The following quotes illustrate the codes of *educating*, *teaching*, and *mentoring* and highlight the theme of *confidence in teaching and learning tasks*.

> I love educating. When I took the...position, I was told "You're going to have to drop some of your teaching load." And I was like, "I can't, I can't let go of teaching." I love teaching, I love to help other people teach, help other people realize what education is all about. Not just looking at the teaching one-on-one with a student but looking at the whole

concept of education. I love to help mentor and get people going and start expressing

themselves (Gina).

I feel the curriculum development and the classroom I'm very prepared for. The

curriculum, teaching part—I'm really confident to handle that part (Mary).

Frustration with ambiguity and lack of information

While the chairs described a number of specific resources and skills they felt they

needed, the overall connection was an underlying frustration with not being given the clear

information they felt they needed to be able to best do their jobs. The codes *ambiguity*,

frustration, and *lack of information* occurred frequently and in close proximity to one another.

Participants expressed interest in receiving clear and regular communication. The specific needs

that were described included information on budget processes, legal policies, and grant writing.

Faculty generally are not involved in these tasks, and chairs are frustrated with the lack of

training on these newer responsibilities (Floyd, 2016). The participants' descriptions also

included numerous mentions of needing skills to be able to better deal with difficult people and

situations, guidelines for the chair and faculty responsibilities, and overall frustration with not

having or being able to find the information they needed. This frustration manifested in

descriptions in all aspects of the interviews, not just the questions pertaining to not having what

they need. The frustration also came through in their voices in describing most of the aspects of

their jobs. While the frustration does not hold them back from enjoying the work they do, there

was a commonality that the lack of easily accessible information complicated their day-to-day

tasks.

The following quotes illustrate the codes of *ambiguity*, *frustration*, and *lack of*

information, and highlight the same theme.

...because we are asked to do so many different things. We have the dean's expectations. And then the faculty have expectations, and then there's so many administrative expectations that you have to manage your time on. So I guess I would say the thing that serves me the best throughout that whole kind of craziness is this adaptability I think we all have. I think that that is one essential ingredient, in my opinion, to being successful as a chair. Because if you are not able to adapt, I don't think this is necessarily the best role for you (Susan).

One of the things here with the chair has been to figure out who does what. It's not entirely clear (Kristen).

It's a small thing, but when you've got 20 small things all happening at the same time... (Eric).

So there were often times where we would be asked for information where we weren't provided the information that you need to actually answer the questions, gather the data. So it was always a scramble. If you don't know the big picture, and then somebody's always asking you for little pieces, you can't fit the puzzle together (Ophelia).

Uncertainty is hard to manage. But if we could pull ourselves back and try to eliminate as much uncertainty as possible by having such guidelines, but then telling the chairs "Hey guys, here's something for you to fall back on, but know that there are going to be instances that don't fall into this perfectly, and then that's where your judgment comes into play (Ophelia).

What are some key policies here that our work centers around that we really need to understand, not just the written word, but the intent of, so that we have a clear idea of what our common mission and goal is (Susan).

Desire for development in processes and challenging managerial dynamics

Throughout the descriptions of what they felt they needed, the chairs expressed a strong interest in learning more about their jobs and proactively being able to manage their departments well. The codes of *difficult conversations* and *emotional intelligence* came up throughout the interviews. There were frequent mentions of interest in professional development, including how to handle difficult conversations and managing from the middle. Communication is an area that appears in most literature discussing leadership skills, and directly impacts a leader's ability to form relationships (Basham & Campbell, 2010; Cipriano & Riccardi, 2017; Delgado & Mitchell, 2016; Hempsall, 2014; Kalargyrou & Woods, 2009; Parrish, 2015; Sirkis, 2011). Emotional intelligence is a related set of skills that impact a leader's ability to manage relationships and create a positive and productive work climate (Parrish, 2015). Participants were clear in their continuing desire to grow and learn, particularly related to communication and emotional intelligence. While very few had formal professional development in duties related to the academic chair role, chairs had been seeking out and independently completing development opportunities whenever they found the chance.

The following quotes illustrate the codes of *difficult conversations* and *emotional intelligence* and highlight the theme of *desire for development in processes and challenging managerial dynamics.*

> First, communication. I think some time for people to reflect on effective communication, and that also includes communication in times of crisis, conflict resolution (Mary).
> So being able to not just focus on what needs to be done, but the bigger ideas too because it's really easy to just focus on what's happening at the time and there's always something that gets in the way. So having the bigger ideas (Imelda).

I think a lot of emotional intelligence, because I think that every faculty member requires an almost individual approach and that means that the chairperson needs to find that approach just like we try to find it with each student. We need to be able to see the other individual and see what may or may not work with that other individual and that's what we should be working on (Ann).

It's definitely communication skills. So you know, I'm sure as a chair, all the chairs would like to support their faculty as much as possible. But sometimes a job needs to be done you know, I mean communication is key (Quinn).

Strong desire for connection

Perhaps the strongest theme to emerge was the chairs repeatedly stating—both explicitly and implicitly—a desire for connection and community with other chairs across the college. The codes *connection*, *community*, *networking*, and c*amaraderie* were sprinkled throughout the interviews and heavily concentrated when discussing impactful experiences. Extended development opportunities that bring department chairs together to build connections and to learn from one another have tremendous value; however, they are rarely used (Day 2011; Thorpe & Garside, 2017; Wells & Herie, 2017).

All of the participants have completed the college's Excel leadership program, and while the Excel program is not focused on academic leadership, all who participated found the networking and connections were the most valuable parts of the experience. Many chairs also noted that the college's recent move to bring department chairs together for professional development and to accomplish cross-divisional tasks has provided a needed sense of collaboration and collegiality. They noted that the conversations and networking have helped with challenging situations and have provided perspective on regular tasks and responsibilities.

The following quotes illustrate the codes of *connection*, *community*, *networking*, and *camaraderie* and highlight the theme of *desire for connection*.

I think cohort training. Where they get to know other chairs well, so they feel part of a community (Kristin).

The most valuable thing I took away from that, because it was very early in my time here, is that I met a number of people across campus. So in terms of networking, invaluable. (Mary).

So it was good to see what other leaders were thinking, other chairs were thinking. Whether they were similar to mine or different to mine. It was good to know…and then having that sense of camaraderie or at least the feeling that...or even the feeling that we need something like this to come together (Susan).

Conclusion

While each participant noted professional development interests and needs more specific to their department and experience, a number of frequently arising codes led to common themes in their descriptions of their lived experience. As the themes emerged, the emotion coding helped to identify where the strongest impact was felt in their descriptions of their experiences. The themes that emerged centered on the inherent desire of chairs to contribute, the confidence of chairs in their discipline-based work, the desire for more information on how to best do their jobs, and their strong interest in building a community of fellow leaders. These themes will be used to answer the research study questions and to clarify the need for further research.

CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION

This chapter describes the study findings and uses them to answer the overall study research questions. The phenomenon was studied through first-hand accounts of individual chairs' experiences. Interview transcripts were coded and themes were extracted. Both the explicit answers and the thematic analysis assisted in approaching the study research questions.

Interpretation and Alignment of Findings with Literature

The findings and themes of the study were examined to answer the research question that directed the study. While there were small differences in comparing the findings of this study to the overall body of literature, the commonalities were prevalent. The conceptual framework for this study was the American Association of Community College's (AACC) leadership competencies, which included 59 competencies grouped into 11 categories. The categories ranged from a big-picture perspective—such as the role of the community college in society at large—to characteristics individual leaders should possess (AACC, 2018). When compared to the conceptual framework of the AACC leadership competencies, the findings of this study supported the suggested competencies, but to a much smaller degree.

Department chair competencies and skills

The first research question examined what competencies/skills are needed for performing the department chair role. The specifics of the interview answers as well as the thematic analysis provided a foundation for answering this question. Specific answers varied although there were several commonalities. Most of the chairs discussed a need to be comfortable with the internal processes of the college, although the specific processes in their answers varied. For example, one chair was concerned with the faculty evaluation process, while another was more concerned with budget processes. Legal processes were discussed as a concern and, although less frequently

noted, student disciplinary processes were also addressed. An initial lack of information and support can hamper the department chairs' ability to do their work and could be detrimental to the success of the institution (Carroll & Wolverton, 2004; Gmelch & Buller, 2015).

All chairs noted that comfort and confidence with teaching and learning were integral to the job. Chairs were first and foremost faculty and educators, and they saw their role of mentoring fellow educators in their department as one of their most important tasks. As most of the participants were coordinators before becoming chairs, they were very comfortable with the curriculum and disciplinary aspects of the positions. The importance of being comfortable as a faculty member was not mentioned often in the literature, beyond the acknowledgement that most chairs are promoted to the leadership position because of their success as faculty members (Braun, et al., 2009; Hecht, 2004; Parrish, 2015).

Emotional intelligence emerged as a group of skills valuable for a department chair to master. Parrish (2013) notes that emotional intelligence has been tied to effective academic leadership, and empathy and controlling both one's emotions and the emotions of others is important. One participant noted that it was challenging to be able to convey to the department the sometimes unknown impact of happenings at the college without unintentionally conveying the full worry that comes with the leadership role. Several other participants also noted how important it was to keep emotions in check, while at the same time conveying empathy when in difficult situations.

Communication skills were brought up by most participants, particularly as they relate to being able to deal with difficult conversations and difficult people. Massaro (2011) discussed the importance of communicating regularly and effectively and building group cohesion in order to guide a department through change. Several participants noted that chairs needed to be able to

deal directly with change, as well as know how to guide their departments through change.

MASCC has been dealing with several large initiatives that might change how faculty approach

their work, and participants noted the challenges of navigating this process. Managing people

both up and down the chain of command was seen as important by participants, particularly as

chairs felt caught between the expectations of the faculty they lead and the administrators to

whom they report. This dichotomy was discussed as part of the challenge of the mid-level

position, where the chair is both an advocate and a buffer (Hecht, 2004; Thorpe & Garside,

2017).

Organization was brought up in all of the interviews as a major requirement of being able

to do the job well. Many chairs noted the importance of time management skills, not in terms of

personal deficit but in terms of sheer necessity given the large and varied number of tasks for

which chairs are responsible. This was partnered with a sense of being overwhelmed with the

volume of both regular and impromptu tasks and requests. The literature highlighted the

department chair role being a major source of key day-to-day decisions (Carroll & Wolverton,

2004; Gmelch & Miskin, 2011).

The study findings align with the literature examining important attributes for chairs,

noting that the skills required for chairs are not traditionally the skills rewarded in faculty (Sirkis,

2011). Very few chairs are offered development opportunities before becoming a chair in aspects

of the job that end up being the most important (Morris & Laipple, 2015). Communication,

emotional intelligence, relationship building, and ability to accomplish the tasks of the job are

the most commonly noted characteristics mentioned in the literature (Basham & Campbell, 2010;

Cipriano & Riccardi, 2017; Cleverley-Thompson, 2016; Delgado & Mitchell, 2016; Hempsall,

2014; Kalargyrou & Woods, 2009; Kotter, 2012; Parrish, 2015; Sirkis, 2011). However, the

findings of this study put additional emphasis on the need to be confident in working in the classroom and mentoring others in their teaching, which has not been consistently noted in the literature.

Professional development needs

The second research question inquired about the professional development needs of community college department chairs. While the participants echoed the concerns noted in the previous section, a few additional components were mentioned. The most primary need was an acknowledgement that professional development is needed. Participants noted that they individually sought workshops when they identified needs and opportunities. This aligned with the literature noting that most academic administrators do not feel entirely prepared for their positions, and chairs in particular learn either on the job or through their own collection of random development experiences (Smith & Hughey, 2006; Wolverton et al., 2005).

Conflict resolution was noted as a particularly valuable development opportunity. Participants expressed an interest in having professional development regarding difficult conversations, dealing with change, and other interaction skills. Chairs were aware that they needed to develop strong relationships with those they lead and to manage the expectations of those to whom they report. The importance of relationship building was a common factor in the literature, noting it was identified as a needed skill by several studies (Kotter, 2012; Parrish, 2015; Sirkis, 2011). Processes were brought up again, especially institution-specific processes and where and how to find details of those processes. Chairs expressed a strong desire to have better access to the information they need to be better able to attend to their responsibilities independently.

The strongest overlap between the findings of this study and the literature regarding professional development needs were the desire for training on dealing with difficult conversations and managing difficult people. Consistently, leaders want and need to know how to communicate with difficult people and in difficult situations, while still building successful relationships (Basham & Campbell, 2010; Cipriano & Riccardi, 2017; Cleverley-Thompson, 2016; Delgado & Mitchell, 2016; Hempsall, 2014; Kalargyrou & Woods, 2009; Kotter, 2012; Parrish, 2015; Sirkis, 2011). The study findings align well with the distinctions made between leader development and leadership development. Participants wanted to learn more about the departmental processes for which they are responsible but had a strong desire to connect and learn more about overall approaches to leadership at the institution. Lee and Corrao (2011) discussed that leaders who were brought together for development created bonds that increased understanding of the institution as a whole, as well as increased collaboration between areas. The literature discusses in depth not only the need for management and administrative task training, but also the importance of collaboration and learning from one another to create leadership networks (Day 2011; Thorpe & Garside, 2017; Wells & Herie, 2017).

Valuable professional development experiences

The third study research question regarded which professional development experiences department chairs found most valuable. When asked about their professional development experiences, most chairs noted they had little training that related to their chair responsibilities. One chair had one-on-one training with the previous chair that allowed specific duties to be explained before the transfer of authority. The common experience participants had, although not all before assuming the chair role, was the internal Excel Leadership program. Participants noted that while valuable, the program was not targeted to assist them in their chair role. Institution-

specific leadership programs are a common professional development opportunity; however, these grow-your-own programs are not consistent in their approach or results (Gmelch & Buller, 2015; Reille & Kezar, 2010). Most other chairs noted that their development experiences have been pieced together through independently seeking out training when a specific need arose for tasks such as budget preparation.

The major commonality for all of the chairs interviewed was an emphasis on the need for peer-to-peer mentoring and networking. The participants' completion of the Excel Leadership program emphasized their interest in development as well as community. While participants noted the material covered in Excel was general and not specifically geared toward academic leadership, they commented that the most valuable part of the experience was the networking and getting to know other leaders across campus. Participants all expressed an interest in regular connection, mentoring, and conversation. Chairs noted that regular opportunities to meet, learn, and discuss concerns have tremendous value. As leadership evolves, the individual leader characteristics are balanced by the need for a larger collaborative leadership network (Day & Harrison, 2007).

These findings align well with the literature on professional development experiences, which emphasized the importance of experiential learning, mentoring, and rooting development opportunities in the vision and culture of the institution (Day, 2001; Gmelch & Buller, 2015; Hempsall, 2014). It was also noted that cohort-type training allows for a better understanding of the role of leadership in a college and creates opportunities for enhanced cross-departmental collaboration (Lee & Corrao, 2011; Ruben, De Lisi, & Gigliotti, 2018)

Types of development opportunities offered

The fourth study research question asked what types of professional development opportunities are offered to chairs. At MASCC, there has been very little professional development offered specifically for chairs. All participants had completed the on-campus Excel leadership training program. Some divisions provided some targeted development for chairs in their area, covering basic budget and administrative tasks. Within the last year, MASCC offered a series of workshops on coaching, and is working to set up additional development offerings targeting academic chairs' needs. The coaching workshops were intended to coincide with the adoption of a new evaluation tool; however, the coaching workshops did not cover difficult conversations. While the literature noted the prevalence of community college leadership doctoral programs (Forthun & Freeman, 2017), none of the participants noted any participation is such programs. Only one chair noted any travel for professional development, having had the opportunity to participate in the national Chairs' Academy program. Such external programs tend to be expensive and limited, therefore not commonly used for regular chair development (Gmelch & Buller, 2015; Reille & Kezar, 2010). Most of the development that chairs participated in was independent and self-directed.

The participants' experiences mirrored the discussions in the literature. Research has found that very few academic leaders receive any position-specific training before assuming their leadership role (Chu, 2012; Floyd, 2016; Morris & Laipple, 2015; Preston & Floyd, 2016; Ruben, De Lisi, & Gigliotti, 2018; Sirkis, 2011). While participants in this study all had the Excel leadership training experience, they all noted that very little of the material directly pertained to their department chair duties.

Alignment with AACC leadership competencies

The AACC leadership competencies are a very comprehensive framework that suggests what competencies community college leaders need at six different levels: faculty, mid-level leaders, senior-level leaders, aspiring CEOs, new CEOs, and CEOs. For the purposes of this study, department chairs are categorized mid-level leaders. The competencies covered concepts ranging from personal attributes such as courage to big-picture considerations such as accreditation (see Appendix A for full list).

Comparison to the complete list of 59 suggested competencies showed a strong alignment with six competencies (see Table 3). While applicable to a college president or vice-president, most of the competencies appear to be beyond the day-to-day responsibilities of most department chairs.

Table 3

Top Alignment with AACC Competencies

Competency Focus Area	Competency
Governance, Institutional Policy, and Legislation	College Policies and Procedures
Institutional Leadership	Conflict Management
Collaboration	Work with Supervisor
	Institutional Team Building
Personal Traits and Abilities	Emotional Intelligence
	Time Management and Planning

The findings of this study point to the importance of a mid-level leader having access to and an understanding of college policies and procedures. College policies and procedures is listed as a competency within the area of Governance, Institutional Policy, and Legislation.

Participants noted there was often a lack of access to information when there were questions about college policy or procedures, whether they were budget, evaluation, or student related. These processes were not part of their duties as faculty members, and the lack of training can cause great frustration (Floyd, 2016).

Within the area of Institutional Leadership, findings also aligned with the AACC competency of conflict management. Participants noted the regular need for dealing with difficult situations and diffusing both active and potential conflict. Participants noted they had little to no training on dealing with difficult situations, although those who have been chairs longer seemed less wary of dealing with such situations. Morris and Laipple (2015) found handling grievances and dealing with someone's poor performance were frequently noted concerns for chairs.

Within the area of Collaboration, the competencies of working with supervisor and institutional team building were highlighted in the study findings. Participants commented on the need to be able to collaborate with all levels in the chain of command, including learning how to manage expectations with supervisors. This supports the discussion of the importance of building relationships (Cleverley-Thompson, 2016), the overall need for leadership development to be about institutional networks and creating opportunities for collaboration (Day & Harrison, 2007), and the reality of the chair position being one that is a buffer between administration and faculty (Thorpe & Garside, 2017).

Within the competency area of Personal Traits and Attributes, emotional intelligence and time management and planning were both highlighted in the study findings. Department chairs noted emotional intelligence was vital in terms of managing faculty and staff, as well as in dealing with student issues. The managing of those relationships connects with the described

abilities of identifying, interpreting, and managing emotions both of self and others (Parrish, 2013).

Time management and planning was highlighted as a need for chairs. Participants discussed the large number of disparate duties that chairs find themselves facing, as well as the challenge of prioritizing both known and suddenly occurring tasks. This aligns with the literature, which noted that many chairs find the competing priorities frustrating and a negative impact on their work (Floyd, 2016; Wolverton et al., 2005).

While many of the AACC competencies would likely be acknowledged as important, very few were identified through the phenomenological approach of examining participants lived experiences. None of the external competencies appeared to be on the radar of the study participants. As noted previously, the process of creating the list of AACC leadership competencies appears to be centered on high-level leaders, and perhaps could benefit from additional feedback from those in the mid-level leadership positions. Department chairs are in a unique position as mid-level leaders where they are generally either promoted to the position through their performance in a very different faculty role or just step up to fill a department need. Given the changes of their role as a bridge between the strategic vision of the college and the day-today academic operations, their professional development needs deserve notice (Gmelch & Miskin, 2011; Hecht, 2004; Wolverton et al., 2005; Sirkis, 2011).

Implications and Recommendations for Action

The study findings highlight several potential implications for theory, practice, and research. In terms of theory, the findings shed light on an area that has not yet been fully tapped. While there is research on leadership efficacy in higher education, much of that research focuses on leaders at the vice-president, president, and board of trustees level. The knowledge and skill

base for those positions appears to differ from the knowledge and skill base needed for mid-level leaders such as department chairs. Department chairs are entering their leadership roles with little training, and there is minimal theory to help develop that training. An overarching framework to guide department chair leadership development grounded in leadership theory would be an asset to the industry.

There are also implications for practice. The study findings point to a continuing and pressing need for professional development programs targeted to support department chairs as they are assuming the role and on a continuing basis. The frustration expressed by the participants suggests that more access to information and training programs will help to alleviate confusion and some of the feelings of being overwhelmed. While an overall framework should be created and used to guide department chair leadership development, immediate action can be taken to fill the gaps in chairs' knowledge.

The lack of a specific framework for developing department chairs, particularly at community colleges, speaks to the need for more depth of research on programs for mid-level leaders. Future studies should examine the efficacy of development programs, as well as the implications of the lack of development on the functioning of an institution. Studies can also examine community college department chair development experiences across institutions. Research into those experiences could be compared to the satisfaction of department chairs with their roles, as well as turnover or burnout in those positions. The lack of training in appropriate processes and procedures can put the institution at risk, with chairs not knowing what decisions might have legal implications (Gmelch & Buller, 2015).

The content needs for training seem to vary, so a school such as MASCC might provide a rotating series based on the practical needs of chairs as they are identified. The findings point

clearly to a need for many professional development opportunities, including time and opportunity for chairs to gather, converse, and collaborate. The identified desire of department chairs for the camaraderie found in cohort-based training is a clear opportunity to build and strengthen internal leadership networks. Training as a group allows chairs to feel less isolated and to build collaborative relationship across an institution (Day & Harrison, 2007). There are benefits to chairs having access to peers for problem-solving and discussing leadership decisions, as well as for creating networks that become a part of an institution's larger leadership collaborative strategy (Day & Harrison, 2007; Eddy, 2010).

A recurring comment was the lack of available information or difficulty finding appropriate information and resources. From a practical standpoint, this lack of information and available resources points to an opportunity for identifying and gathering the most commonly used resources and having them in a central location. Clear expectations for chairs and a discussion of available resources would be a strong start for an orientation program for new chairs. While the specific topics needed for a department chair professional development program might vary based on an individual institution's needs, the need for clear, easily located tools and collegial support would likely be useable at any institution (Day & Harrison, 2007; Gmelch & Buller, 2015).

Recommendations for Further Study

This research study assisted in closing in the literature gap of what chairs' themselves want and need for their development; however, there is much left to study. Future studies could include specific follow-up into the efficacy of both types of professional development, as well as the impact of different types of content—for example, closely examining how a grow-your-own

leadership program directly addresses and correlates with the challenges and values of a particular institution.

A future study could also include specific analysis of self-reported skills, impact of training and development on those skills, and the analysis of faculty satisfaction with their department chairs' leadership skills. Beyond self-reported data, is there evidence that those within the department benefit from the continued development of their leaders? Training focused on specific competencies could also be studied for efficacy and for participant satisfaction.

An examination of different modalities of professional development would assist in narrowing down the better ways to create and organize leadership training programs. Institutions that are seen to be leaders in the industry could be closely examined for any correlation between how they choose and develop their mid-level leaders and how those leaders use that development for the benefit of their institution. Leadership development research in business is a more robust body of knowledge. Research could be conducted to examine how and where the business leadership literature can usefully inform the progress of leadership development in higher education. As higher education as an industry continues to evolve, further studies could also examine how the chair role itself is impacted by the industry changes.

Conclusion

This phenomenological study examined the lived experiences of department chairs while identifying their professional development needs. A series of interviews were conducted and the transcripts were analyzed for themes. The data demonstrated that the participants in this study have a passion for education, a desire to contribute to their department and institution, and an interest in expanding their skills to grow in their jobs. Participants had very few professional development opportunities offered to them regarding their chair duties, but they continually

sought individual or short-term development opportunities. Participants expressed an overall frustration with the frenetic nature of the position. Chairs wanted to build relationships and found the camaraderie and collegial problem solving with other chairs particularly helpful and rewarding. Even with the variation of time spent as chair in the participant pool, there was very little variation in the needed skills and desired professional development. Chairs who were brand new as well as chairs who were considered veterans desired clarity on their position, development on managing challenging people, and a community with whom to share knowledge and experiences.

Even with the palpable frustrations, chairs were pleased to be able to support their faculty and to be of service to their departments. The findings of this study point to an opportunity to focus on the professional and leadership development of department chairs to ease their transition into such a pivotal leadership position.

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Appendix A

Competency Focus Area	Competency
1. **Organizational Culture**: An effective community college leader embraces the mission, vision, and values of the community college, and acknowledges the significance of the institution's past while charting a path for its future.	a) Mission, Vision, and Values of the Community College b) Culture of the institution and the external community
2. **Governance, Institutional Policy, and Legislation**: An effective leader is knowledgeable about the institution's governance framework and the policies that guide its operation.	a) Organizational structure of the community college b) Governance structure c) College Policies and procedures d) Board relations
3. **Student Success**: An effective leader supports student success across the institution, and embraces opportunities to improve access, retention, and success.	a) Student Success b) Consistency between the colleges operation and student-focused agenda c) Data-usage d) Program/performance review e) Evaluation for improvement
4. **Institutional Leadership**: An effective leader understands the importance of interpersonal relationships, personal philosophy, and management skills to create a student-centered institution.	a) Be an influencer b) Support team building c) Performance management d) Lead by example e) Problem-solving techniques f) Conflict Management g) Advocate for professional development across the institution h) Customer service i) Transparency
5. **Institutional Infrastructure**: An effective community college leader is fluent in the management of the foundational aspects of the institution, including the establishment of a strategic plan, financial and facilities management, accreditation, and technology master planning.	a) Strategic and operational planning b) Budgeting c) Prioritization and allocation of resources d) Accreditation e) Facilities Master planning and management f) Technology master planning
6. **Information and Analytics**: An effective community college leader understands how to use data in ways that give a holistic representation of the institution's performance, and is open to the fact that data might reveal unexpected or previously unknown trends or issues.	a) Qualitative and quantitative data b) Data analytics
7. **Advocacy and Mobilizing/motivating others**: An effective community college leader understands and embraces the importance of championing community college ideals, understands how to mobilize stakeholders to take action on behalf of the college, and understands how to use all the communication resources available to connect with the college community.	a) Community college ideals b) Stakeholder mobilization c) Media relations d) Marketing and social media

8.	**Fundraising and relationship cultivation**: An effective community college leader cultivates relationships across sectors that support the institution and advance the community college agenda.	a) Fundraising b) Alumni relationships c) Media relationships d) Legislative relations e) Public relations f) Workforce partnerships
9.	**Communications**: An effective community college leader demonstrates strong communication skills, leads and fully embraces the role of community college spokesperson.	a) Presentation, speaking, and writing skills b) Active listening c) Global and cultural competence d) Strategies or multi-generational engagement e) Email etiquette f) Fluency with social media and emerging technologies g) Consistency in messaging h) Crisis communications
10.	**Collaboration**: An effective community college leader develops and maintains responsive, cooperative, mutually beneficial, and ethical internal and external relationships that nurture diversity, promote the success of the community college, and sustain the community college mission.	a) Interconnectivity and interdependence b) Work with supervisor c) Intuitional team building d) Collective bargaining
11.	**Personal Traits and Abilities**: An effective leader possesses certain personal traits and adopts a focus on honing abilities that promote the community college agenda.	a) Authenticity b) Emotional Intelligence c) Courage d) Ethical standards e) Self-management and environmental scanning f) Time management and planning g) Familial impact h) Forward-looking philosophy i) Embrace change

Appendix B

Draft Interview Protocol

Opening Statement: Thank you so much for agreeing to participate in an interview. The goal of this interview is to gain better insight into your experiences as a department chair with professional development, and with skills and competencies needed for the position. This interview will be recorded in order for me to transcribe our conversation at another time. Recording also allows me to ensure I am representing your thoughts and ideas accurately. There are no correct or incorrect answers, I am only seeking to understand your experiences.

If at any time you feel uncomfortable, please let me know and we can move to the next question or end the interview. Please take a moment to review and sign this consent statement.

Are you ready to begin?

1. Are you currently a department chair?

   - (If yes) how long have you been a department chair?

   - (If no) how long were you a department chair before stepping down from the position?

2. Tell me about your experience of becoming a chair.

3. What interested you in becoming a chair?

4. What was your supervisory leadership experience prior to taking on the chair role?

5. Please describe any leadership training you had before assuming the chair role.

6. Please describe any leadership training you have had since assuming the chair role.

- What resonated with you in your professional development experience (format, topic, etc).

7. As chair, please tell me of an experience where you felt you didn't have what you needed in terms of skill or competency to handle a situation.

8. As a chair, please describe an experience where you felt well prepared in terms of skill or competency to handle a situation.

9. If offered the opportunity to suggest professional development for department chairs, what kind of experience would be most impactful?

10. What skills or competencies do you suggest chairs should have in order to be able to best do their jobs?

11. What skills or competencies would you suggest professional development for chairs focus on?

Thank you for your time today!

Potential prompts for further information:

- Give me an example…
- What was it like for you…
- How did you feel about…
- Tell me more about…

Appendix C

UNIVERSITY OF NEW ENGLAND

CONSENT FOR PARTICIPATION IN RESEARCH

Project Title: Cultivating Leaders: Professional Development Needs of Community College Chairs

Principal Investigator(s): Heidi Kirkman

Introduction:

- Please read this form. You may also request that the form is read to you. The purpose of this form is to give you information about this research study, and if you choose to participate, document that choice.

- You are encouraged to ask any questions that you may have about this study, now, during or after the project is complete. You can take as much time as you need to decide whether or not you want to participate. Your participation is voluntary.

Why is this research study being done?

To investigate the professional development needs of community college department chairs, to better provide programing directed at increasing the impact of development programs.

Who will be in this study?

The invitation to participate will be sent to all current and past department chairs at Mid-Atlantic Suburban Community College (MASCC).

What will I be asked to do?

As a participant you will be asked to participate in a one-hour semi-structured interview.

The interview will consist of questions pertaining to professional development needs and experiences as a department chair.

<u>What are the possible risks of taking part in this study?</u>

There are minimal risks involved with this study.

<u>What are the possible benefits of taking part in this study?</u>

The benefits include assisting community colleges in better offering and designing leadership development opportunities for department chairs.

<u>What will it cost me?</u>

There is no cost to participate in this research study.

<u>How will my privacy be protected?</u>

All responses will be kept confidential. Any specific examples or quotes will have all identifying information stripped.   Interview data will be stored off-site and will be password protected.

<u>How will my data be kept confidential?</u>

Interview data will be stored off-site and will be password protected.

<u>What are my rights as a research participant?</u>

- Your participation is voluntary. Your decision to participate will have no impact on your current or future relations with the University.
- Your decision to participate will not affect your relationship with Heidi Kirkman.
- You may skip or refuse to answer any question for any reason.
- If you choose not to participate there is no penalty to you and you will not lose any benefits that you are otherwise entitled to receive.
- You are free to withdraw from this research study at any time, for any reason.
  - If you choose to withdraw from the research there will be no penalty to you and you will not lose any benefits that you are otherwise entitled to receive.
- You will be informed of any significant findings developed during the course of the research that may affect your willingness to participate in the research.
- If you sustain an injury while participating in this study, your participation may be ended.

<u>What other options do I have?</u>

- You may choose not to participate.

<u>Whom may I contact with questions?</u>

- The researcher conducting this study is Heidi Kirkman

     o   For more information regarding this study, please contact Heidi Kirkman at hkirkman@une.edu

- If you choose to participate in this research study and believe you may have suffered a research related injury, please contact Dr. Ella Benson at ebenson2@une.edu.

- If you have any questions or concerns about your rights as a research subject, you may call Mary Bachman DeSilva, Sc.D., Chair of the UNE Institutional Review Board at (207) 221-4567 or irb@une.edu.

<u>Will I receive a copy of this consent form?</u>

- You will be given a copy of this consent form.

<u>Participant's Statement</u>

I understand the above description of this research and the risks and benefits associated with my participation as a research subject. I agree to take part in the research and do so voluntarily.

_____   _____

Participant's signature or   Date

Legally authorized representative

_____

Printed name

<u>*Researcher's Statement*</u>

The participant named above had sufficient time to consider the information, had an

opportunity to ask questions, and voluntarily agreed to be in this study.

_____   _____

Researcher's signature   Date

_____

Printed name