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Special Issue: Family Science Careers Through the Eyes of Theory

This manuscript is part of a special issue of Family Science Review entitled Family Science Careers Through the Eyes of Theory, edited by Raeann R Hamon, Ph.D., CFLE. The authors of these deliberately unconventional manuscripts were asked to select and describe a career that a professional with a family science background might pursue. After outlining the professional role, authors reflected upon the family theories that most influence the way they approach their work and perform their professional duties. Authors briefly review the scholarly literature on selected family theories, provide case studies or work scenarios as illustrations of theory in action, and discuss the strengths and weaknesses of the theories in their unique professional contexts. The Special Issue articles are designed to be used individually or in combination, and feature articles about careers in early intervention, special education, family court, child life, and higher education. The introduction to the special issue is available at <https://doi.org/10.26536/GMJK4953>. The complete special issue is available at <https://doi.org/10.26536/ZLUL3923>.

The Role of Department Chair through the Lenses of Family Systems Theory and Family Strengths Perspective

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ABSTRACT. As middle managers in higher education, department chairs play a critical role in the university structure while operating in an ambiguous location between faculty and senior administration. This paper will take a closer look at the role of department chair, how chairs are selected and prepared for the position, what the job entails, qualities of an effective chair, and challenges within the position. Then, after brief descriptions of family systems theory and family strengths perspective, the benefit of each as a useful lens for enacting the position of department chair will be explored. Sample applications of each will be provided.

Keywords: department chair, family systems, family strengths, family science career

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The Role of Department Chair through the Lenses of Family Systems Theory and Family Strengths Perspective

In the 1880s, as knowledge and the need for departmental distinctions increased, the position of department chair emerged to assist academic units in functioning proficiently (Gonaim, 2016). According to Michael Rumsey (2013), editor of *The Oxford Handbook of Leadership*, “the heart of academic institutions resides in their department” (p. 317), particularly since academic departments play a critical role in implementing the university’s mission and goals (Gonaim). The department chair is uniquely positioned “at the organizational fulcrum between faculty and senior administration” (Armstrong & Woloshyn, 2017, p. 97). Consequently, the leadership afforded by the department chair is a crucial factor for departmental and institutional success. This paper will review the role of the department chair and then outline how family systems theory and family strengths perspective provide a useful lens for enacting the position.

Department Chair

Chairs of Human Development and Family Science (HDFS) Departments reside in a “betwixt state” (Freeman et al., 2020, p. 906). As a liaison between departmental faculty and higher levels of administration, chairs exist in “liminality” without feeling secure in either location (Freeman, p. 897). As such, “the position is internally and externally facing... requir[ing] that one pay attention to the detail of day-to-day departmental life while also focusing on matters of college and university governance, budget, policy, and practice” (Kruse, 2020, p. 740). Chairs must simultaneously face administration (to whom they report) in one direction and faculty (those they represent) in the other (Freeman; Kruse). Complicating matters, this work typically fails to align with the academic preparation chairs bring to the role (Gmelch et al., 2017).

Selection of Department Chairs

Chairs are selected in several different ways depending upon the institution. Most frequently, chairs arise from the ranks of current departmental faculty via faculty selection and/or administrative appointment. The role often rotates among faculty members after a particular service period, perhaps three or four years. Some departments expect the chair to have achieved tenure, while others do not specify. Some faculty pursue chair roles to advance on the administrative ladder while others take their turn in departmental service (Kruse, 2020).

Considerations Before Assuming the Department Chair Role

Given the ambiguity and variability of possible chair responsibilities, those aspiring to be chairs should carefully ponder the opportunity. Based on surveys of two cohorts of department chairs, Gmelch and colleagues (2017) offered ten tips for those considering assuming the position of department chair, much of which is also endorsed by Freeman et al. (2020). The first, candidates should only assume a chair role after they attain promotion to full professor, is related to the second; candidates should only accept the chair position after receiving tenure. This advice is based on the alarming trend that a greater burden is being placed on more vulnerable faculty who are still pursuing full promotion and tenure. Third, applicants should assume the chair role for intrinsic reasons (to advance oneself and the department) early enough to allow the option of progressing into administrative roles within the university. Fourth, aspirants should take on the chair role only after obtaining professional credentials and credibility since it is very challenging to maintain and balance academic scholarship with chair obligations. Fifth, those choosing to accept a department chair appointment should plan to dedicate sufficient time to learning the position. About 41 percent of chairs in the study felt competent after nine

months, with another 40 percent feeling competent after two years. Sixth, new chairs should seek professional support and direction from a growing network of confidants outside the department but inside the profession to serve as a sounding board and offer professional guidance. Seventh, chairs new to the job should seek out a more experienced chair to mentor and guide. Eighth, candidates should work to maintain boundaries between work and personal life since most chairs in the study listed balancing work-life pressures among their top five stressors. Ninth, those considering the chair role should consult with and gain support of family and significant others prior to assuming the position. Finally, incoming chairs should negotiate an automatic sabbatical at the conclusion of the chair term to refresh disciplinary knowledge because it can be very difficult to keep current in one's discipline while a department chair (p. 3).

Job Description of Department Chairs

Department chair job descriptions may vary within and between institutions. There may be some unique roles or expectations depending upon the department's disciplinary composition. For instance, chairs of nursing and education departments often assume specific responsibilities for ensuring state and national accreditation standards and reporting, while chairs of chemistry departments likely bear significant accountability for health and safety matters in laboratory settings not required of other chairs. So too, chairs of arts departments likely need to attend various theatrical and musical performances, as well as artists' exhibits. If the department includes an NCFR-approved program, chairs of human development and family science departments may have special reporting obligations to maintain their approval as a Certified Family Life Educator (CFLE) designated program. Since HDFS tends to be a "discovery" major (Hagenbaugh & Hamon, 2011), HDFS chairs are also likely to devote more time to promoting and educating prospective and current students and their families about the HDFS possibility. Thus, the chair role can be ambiguous (Bowden et al., 2020) and enacted in significantly different ways, even within the same institution (Creaton & Heard-Laureote, 2021). Likewise, expectations for departmental leadership at community colleges tend to be nuanced compared to four-year colleges and universities or graduate programs. For instance, chairs at community colleges need to be attentive to career and technical skills, as well as transfer functions, and advocate for the community college system (Craig, 2005).

Faculty handbooks typically outline expectations and policies for department chairs within respective institutions. My university's Community of Educator's Handbook outlines the definition of department chair as follows:

At Messiah University, Department Chairs are term-tenure faculty who continue to function as such with all the rights and responsibilities pertaining, but who also carry an administrative assignment as part of their full-time load. Their primary function as Department Chairs is the day-to-day administration of the department. Additionally, they are expected to provide departmental leadership which balances advocacy within the framework of broader institutional needs, encourages academic excellence through the professional empowerment of all faculty and students within the department, and enhances departmental visibility and credibility in the larger community. (Messiah University, n.d., 2.2.3)

In addition to providing details about the appointment and evaluation of chairs, the Handbook delineates four primary areas of responsibility. They include departmental leadership and support, academic excellence, promotion and visibility, and administration. Specific tasks are delineated within each of the four categories helping chairs to better understand their role, as well as how they will be

evaluated. Thus, distinct expectations of chairs might be delineated within respective university documents.

Despite some potentially unique obligations depending upon disciplinary composition of departments or institutional affiliation, Kruse (2020) reviewed the literature and found that department chairs are generally expected to be responsible for six categories of tasks including department, college, and university governance; instructional leadership; faculty matters, issues, and concerns; student matters, issues and concerns; internal and external communication; and budgets (p. 741). Relative to matters of governance, chairs schedule and lead department meetings; establish and implement goals for student success, research productivity, and inclusion; maintain effective communication across all levels of the institution; prepare annual department-specific reports; monitor compliance with federal, state, and university rules, policies, and procedures; organize and oversee committee work; and advocate for department programs. In terms of instructional leadership, chairs create teaching schedules; implement assessment and revision of department curriculum and programs; manage course evaluation and review; and participate in faculty teaching enhancement programs, modeling best practices in one's own instruction. Within the category of faculty matters, issues and concerns, chairs coordinate search committee efforts; conduct merit and annual reviews; serve as mentor or coach for tenure, promotion, research agendas, grant productivity and internal and external service; promote civility and aid resolution of conflict; encourage faculty engagement in institutional and community service; and support faculty research. Student matters, issues, and concerns of chairs include advising and mentoring students in major selection, progression in degree requirements and scholarship opportunities; handling student complaints and grade appeals; and advocating for student organizations and clubs associated with the department. Internal and external communication involves functioning as primary departmental contact for institutional advancement, recruitment, and retention endeavors; representing the department at events; elevating the image of department programs, faculty, and students; and effectively publicizing department accomplishments and needs. Finally, tasks related to budgeting include preparing and submitting annual budgets; establishing and communicating budget priorities; fairly distributing resources for faculty and student travel, goods, and services; and responding to budget decreases and reallocations (Kruse, 2020, p. 742). Chairs should also possess requisite knowledge in curriculum; institutional systems; faculty members' areas of expertise; human resources policies and practices related to hiring, evaluating, and rewarding faculty; legal issues; and information technology related to budgeting, scheduling, evaluating and the like (Berdrow, 2010, p. 506).

Qualities of Effective Department Chairs

Bryman (2007) and Gonaim (2016) reviewed the literature to ascertain efficacious leadership behaviors for department chairs. Several useful behaviors emerged, including exhibiting strategic vision, initiating department structure to facilitate goal-directed activity, treating faculty justly and with integrity, encouraging open communication and shared decision-making, acting transparently about the department's direction, serving as a role model and exhibiting credibility, fostering a collegial work environment, behaving proactively in advancing the department's mission to internal and external constituencies, providing helpful performance feedback, resourcing and stimulating research and scholarship by balancing the workload, behaving ethically, and enhancing the department's reputation by making quality hires. Important characteristics identified for chairs from these reviews also include being considerate, collegial, trustworthy/honest, fair, respectful, appreciative, self-aware, self-confident, and possessing clarity about leadership philosophy.

Ambrose and colleagues (2005) reiterated the significance of chairs having the ability to foster a collegial work environment. Employing a semi-structured interview with 123 faculty members, they

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discovered that the presence of collegiality within a department strongly impacted faculty satisfaction. Faculty desire chairs who can help manage conflict, foster a sense of community, and offer constructive feedback.

Challenges for Department Chairs

The role of chair is not without its leadership challenges. In fact, Gonaim (2016) describes department chairs as “a life guard without a life jacket” (p. 272) because most chairs receive little or no formal leadership preparation prior to assuming the role (Kruse, 2020).

Numerous challenges confront department chairs. Gmelch and Miskin (2004) identified three primary categories of challenges confronting department chairs: resource challenges, operating a department with limited or diminishing resources; strategic challenges which require prioritizing department goals; and faculty issues, including retaining quality faculty and sustaining faculty morale. Creaton and Heard-Laureote (2021) examined the dissonance between how the role of department chair is presented at the institutional level and how the position is experienced by those in the day-to-day reality of it. Based on interviews with 20 department heads at a university in the UK, they identified four dimensions of the role: managing people, managing resources, managing work, and managing strategy. For almost all respondents managing people, particularly around performance appraisals, was the most challenging and time-consuming component of their job, one for which they received little preparation. Managing work was a challenge since most reported regularly putting in more hours than the standard workday and needing to work on weekends. Huge amounts of email were overwhelming, demanding an inordinate amount of time. The chairs recognized the value of administrative support but acknowledged that they were not able to delegate enough work to offset the demands of the job, particularly when they needed to juggle chair responsibilities with teaching and research obligations. Challenges related to managing resources were the result of a change in the budgeting process which no longer allowed department chairs to decide how to spend surpluses they generated. Finally, many department heads in the sample were frustrated relative to managing strategy; they believed their role to be less strategic and more operational, impacting their ability to be a visionary leader with power to affect outcomes. The authors concluded that while heads of departments can exercise some agency and autonomy, many are frustrated by their limited influence on the strategic direction of the institution.

Kruse (2020) conducted 45 qualitative interviews with chairs from a variety of colleges and universities in the United States and Europe to explore administrative, situational, and relational demands and tensions of the chair role. Three tensions emerged: task tensions, organizational and role tensions, and people and relationship tensions. Task tensions surround balancing management with leadership, balancing working for and representing administration with working for and representing faculty and balancing stagnation with change. Organizational and role tensions involve balancing college and university bureaucracy with aspirations for autocratic and informal leadership, balancing convention with innovation, balancing limited authority with broad responsibility, and balancing equal resource deployment with equitable resource deployment. Finally, people and relationship tensions include balancing self-interest with community/communal good, balancing destructive conflict with productive conflict, balancing cynicism and doubt with optimism and trust without naivete, and balancing self-care with care for others. Despite the stressors of being undertrained and inundated by the workload, chairs persisted because they believed their work could positively impact their departments, faculty, and students.

Gmelch et al. (2017) reviewed department chair surveys conducted in 1991 and 2016 to compare their responses on several items, including top stressors for chairs. In 1991, “having too heavy a

workload” was most stressful and in 2016 “trying to balance their administrative and scholarly responsibilities” created the most stress. For most of both samples, five job characteristics generated the most stress: balancing administration and scholarship; maintaining scholarship; balancing work-life pressures; keeping current in discipline; and email communication (p. 2).

Theory

Department chairs are likely influenced by a variety of theories or perspectives in approaching their work, whether they realize it or not. In this paper, two theoretical perspectives – family systems theory and family strengths perspective—prove useful for enacting the role of chair of a human development and family science department.

Family Systems Theory

Family systems theory is core to the discipline of family science itself (Hamon & Smith, 2014) and shapes how many family scholars and practitioners view the world. An assumption of family systems is that the whole is greater than the sum of the parts. In other words, a family maintains a holistic quality only possible by the unique combination of individual members and their attributes; an entirely new and distinct entity is created as members come together (von Bertalanffy, 1968). Rather than purely summative qualities, systems-level properties emerge because of transactions between the members (Whitchurch & Constantine, 1993). Together these interdependent parts create a unit which possesses unique characteristics, rules, roles, power structures and communication patterns (Smith & Hamon, 2022). A change in one of the parts or a modification of membership is likely to affect not only other members but the entire system.

Several additional assumptions underlie family systems thinking. Systems theory also assumes that individual and family behavior must be understood in context (Smith & Hamon, 2022). Behaviors evolve to serve a function in the context in which the family finds itself. Family systems have boundaries that distinguish them from their environments and reveal who is and who is not part of the system. Boundaries also affect the flow of information and energy between the family system and its environment (Broderick & Smith, 1979). Boundaries can be described as falling somewhere on a continuum between open (highly interactive with the outside environment) or closed (impenetrable by environmental interchange) depending upon their permeability (Smith & Hamon). As a family receives input from its environment and returns output to the environment, both the family system and the environment in which it is nested are modified (Broderick, 1993). Families are self-reflexive and self-regulating (Baptist & Hamon, 2022). While families resist change and attempt to maintain homeostasis, they often incorporate feedback to modify rules, relationships, and system functioning when necessary. Family systems are also goal-seeking (Smith & Hamon). Some families can be highly intent on achieving goals, while others are a bit more laissez-faire about goal attainment. Nonetheless, goals can be explicit or implicit, organized based on their priority, and embedded in decision-making processes of the family. Finally, families are always communicating, and their communication patterns reveal a tremendous amount about their family dynamics (Smith & Hamon).

Family Strengths Perspective

While not a theory with testable hypotheses, a “family strengths perspective is a positive, optimistic worldview or orientation toward life and families, grounded in research” with tens of thousands of family members in many countries (DeFrain & Asay, 2007; DeFrain & Stinnett, 2003, p. 638). Researchers from around the world have identified amazing similarities among families from different cultures who identify themselves as a strong family (DeFrain & Asay; Stinnett et al., 1982).

Family strengths are relationship qualities that promote emotional health and family well-being (DeFrain & Stinnett, 2003; Stinnett 1979a).

The Family Strengths Model proposes six clusters of qualities characteristic of strong families (DeFrain, 1999; Stinnett & DeFrain, 1985). They include commitment, appreciation and affection, positive communication patterns, enjoyable time together, a high degree of religious orientation or spiritual wellness, and successful management of stress and crisis. Commitment is demonstrated through dedication to one another and an investment of time and energy in the family. Strong families prioritize family interaction and engagement and exhibit trust, honesty, dependability, faithfulness and sharing (DeFrain & Asay, 2007). Appreciation and affection were deemed to be essential qualities for strong families. They care for each other, build each other up psychologically, enhance each other's self-esteem, offer many positive strokes, and readily express their love and affection (Stinnett, 1979b; Stinnett & Sauer, 1977). Positive communication patterns are common among strong families; they spend time talking with and listening to one another, which enhances connections. Sometimes conversations are task-oriented as families focus on the need to work together to resolve a problem, however, they share feelings, offer compliments, avoid blame, compromise, and sometimes agree to disagree (DeFrain & Stinnett, 2003). Spending time together is also important for family strength. Such families enjoy plenty of quality time together when members can share fun. Spiritual wellbeing or religious orientation is characteristic of strong families. Such families possess hope, faith, compassion, shared ethical values, and oneness with humankind (DeFrain & Stinnett). For some, this means an awareness of God or higher power which gives them a sense of shared purpose which transcends themselves. For others, it might be expressed in their ethical values or commitment to important causes or what is sacred to them (DeFrain & Stinnett). Finally, strong families successfully manage stress and crisis. Strong families are not immune from stress or stressor events, but they prevent what they can and exhibit adaptability and openness to change when necessary. They possess resilience and perceive crises as challenges and opportunities to work together (DeFrain & Stinnett).

Application One: Fostering a Human Development and Family Science Identity and Creating a Vibrant and Well-functioning “Family” System

As a department chair for 31 years, I discovered that family systems theory (Baptist & Hamon, 2022) is an incredibly useful lens for my work. From my perspective, a key responsibility for a department chair is to foster a vibrant, healthy, and well-functioning system, one in which students wish to learn and faculty wish to work. While my institution identifies as a Christian university of liberal and applied arts and sciences whose mission includes an emphasis on community and reconciliation, other institutions likely emphasize relationship-rich education, as well (Felten & Lambert, 2020). In any event, I view the HDFS department as a system, rich with relationships, and am cognizant of assumptions and concepts from systems theory.

Just like family systems are comprised of interdependent parts, so are departments. The HDFS department is comprised of the HDFS tenure-track faculty, adjuncts who contribute to our curriculum, our administrative assistant, our HDFS and family and consumer sciences students, as well as students (many from other majors) pursuing one of our minors. Each member brings their own attributes to the whole and contributes to the overall operation of the department. Membership is somewhat fluid since new students are added each year and graduates leave. While tenure-track faculty is relatively stable, there are some composition changes related to adjunct shifts dependent upon teaching needs. For example, given the recent departure of one of our full-time faculty members and our increasing reliance on adjunct instructors to teach HDFS courses, I have become more overtly and intentionally inclusive of

adjuncts as their contribution to the whole is increasingly vital. Each component part contributes to the whole and as component parts change (faculty leave, students graduate), the system is modified.

In our attempt to maintain some level of homeostasis and enhance stability, we build a shared identity. Everyone is educated on family science as a discipline and how it is unique and distinctive from other fields (Hamon & Smith, 2014, 2017; NCFR, n.d.). In addition, our campus-affiliated council of the National Council on Family Relations affords a consistent mission for student members, even though its leadership may shift. We also engage in several department activities and traditions throughout the year like our annual bonfire, Christmas party, and graduation celebration dinner to foster an HDFS identity and build community.

Similarly, a department must be understood in context. How is the department nested within and interact with the school or division? What are its relationships like with other departments? How does our departmental subsystem interact with other subsystems within the larger institutional system? Departments need permeable yet clear boundaries, developing and maintaining their own distinct identities while interacting effectively with other systems. In addition to maintaining open boundaries relative to HDFS department membership, the department also maintains open boundaries when it comes to interacting with other subsystems which are part of the larger university system. For instance, we must be cognizant of the need to work effectively and communicate with other subsystems of the institution, like the psychology and social work departments or the admissions and development offices. We strive to foster collegial relationships with faculty and students in other programs by utilizing positive communication practices and taking advantage of opportunities to collaborate. So, too, we must share information with admissions staff to keep them apprised of the programs and opportunities available in our department. At the same time, admissions personnel offer us insights into what prospective students desire in programs and how we can better recruit new students. These interactions provide opportunities for reflexivity as we seek to respond to feedback and changing demands. Evaluation is another type of feedback which helps us to improve instruction and curriculum.

Like families, departments develop rules over time which guide behavior. For instance, in HDFS we are expected to treat our colleagues and students with respect, speak honestly, and offer support. Students can count on faculty to respond to emails in a timely fashion and assist them with matters of importance to them. Department meetings start and end on time out of consideration for other faculty obligations.

Cohesion and adaptability are essential qualities of any departmental system, particularly due to the multitude of changes taking place in higher education. Our department engages in activities that build trust and appropriate closeness. When working together in a cohesive fashion, we are better positioned to respond to the multitude of changes taking place in higher education and support each other as we adapt. Communication operates as an important facilitating dimension in this process. As a chair, I attempt to model honest and open dialogue, as well as non-defensiveness, so that we can effectively resolve problems.

Application Two: Accomplishing the Work of the Department as We Capitalize on Strengths

A primary responsibility of a chair is to establish a departmental culture which allows members of the department to function effectively and efficiently as a team (Hecht et al., 1998). Toward this end, I have found that approaching departmental dynamics from a family strengths perspective is also very helpful. I recognize that each of my departmental faculty and students has strengths and I try to identify and capitalize on them. For instance, when developing teaching schedules, I maximize faculty energy and enthusiasm by trying to assign time slots during which they are their best instructor selves. In

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addition, as a department we work together in determining who teaches which courses based on individual passion for various topics and preferred pedagogical strategies, as well as student needs and preferences. The work of the department is also divided based on individual expertise, skill, and interest. For instance, faculty who have strong advising skills are assigned more advisees, while a faculty member who enjoys committee assignments might best represent the department on a particular institutional committee. Similarly, we encourage faculty to assume institutional assignments that capitalize on their strengths. For example, one faculty member served as Director of Academic Advising for a time, another served as Director of Latino Partnership, and another got released time for scholarship. In a like manner, as student opportunities arise— including work-study positions or department diplomat roles— we look for students who possess related strengths which can be further honed through the experiences.

As chair, I also attempt to foster those characteristics deemed essential to strong families within our department system. For example, I do all that I can to nurture *positive communication* by being clear and transparent myself. Department meeting agendas are disseminated in advance and faculty are encouraged to share their ideas and points of view. I like to think that everyone feels heard. I also openly relate budget information, as well as opinions and actions from upper administration so that we are all aware of what is going on at the institutional level. Over the years, this level of honesty with one another has fostered a culture of trust, permitting us to be real with each other. We communicate to the entire department-- students, faculty, and alumni-- via our department listserv. We announce career and experiential opportunities, upcoming events, and other important information so that everyone receives such notices and can take advantage of the events. We also produce an annual department newsletter that highlights our activities from that year including features from inclusive representations of students and faculty. This resource is a means to positively communicate with current students and their families, as well as alumni and friends about our department.

Spending time together also assists in building a healthy culture. We are a department with lots of traditions which, most of the time, include our families and students. Every fall faculty and students attend a bonfire at one faculty member's home. I host a departmental Christmas party for all faculty and students each year at my home. The full department also gets together for a retreat and senior celebration each spring. Each semester we integrate alumni in these shared experiences as several return to campus to share information about their career paths and how their courses helped prepare them for their professional roles. As chair, I also encourage and provide financial resources for students to attend conferences with faculty. While attending the conferences, it is our tradition to take all departmental faculty, students, and alumni in attendance to dinner on the department's tab. These events and the obvious caring for one another that results build upon a sense of *positive emotional connection*.

One of the most important practices I attempt to implement as a department chair is expressing *appreciation and affirmation*. I try to be quick to thank people for the work that they are doing, acknowledging their contributions to their own development and/or the department's goals. This is also possible through writing letters of reference for students where I highlight student accomplishments and successes or sending faculty members notes of affirmation in their birthday cards and other correspondence. Affirmation in faculty evaluations and expressions of appreciation to adjunct instructors are also important. Alumni, too, should receive praise. Beginning in 2012, the HDFS department selects an Outstanding Alumni Award winner each year. Nominees must show evidence of significant professional leadership and a legacy of distinguished contributions to the service of individuals and families. This award is yet another way to affirm and express gratitude to members of our departmental community, our alumni.

Discussion

Department chairs have the option of choosing the lenses through which they approach the work that they do. These perspectives influence the choices they make and how they enact their role. In my more than 30 years of experience as a department chair, systems theory has served me well. Others, too, acknowledge the value of holding a systems perspective though not necessarily in those terms. For instance, Henrickson et al. (2013) and Berdrow (2010) identified successful academic leaders as those who have a broad understanding of the structure and function of their university and their role within that system. Similarly, Gonaim (2016) recognized the way in which context and culture of a university shape leaders of those organizations and how those leaders need to motivate members to function effectively as a team in meeting department goals; department chairs need to foster cohesiveness and collegiality as these conditions enhance satisfaction and motivation.

According to Griffith (2006), academic leadership depends on effective relationship building, a key consideration of systems thinking. Effective communication is central to department functioning, foundational to conveying the department's vision and mission, and critical in resolving issues (Gonaim, 2016). Maintaining a healthy departmental climate and resolving internal conflicts are crucial (Berdrow, 2010). Kruse (2020) also acknowledged the importance of understanding rules and patterns within the department and university. When systems problems do occur, they require changes to process (Griffith, 2021), underscoring patterns which develop within systems and how they might become dysfunctional. Department chairs might expand the systems emphasis by including ecological systems so that greater attention can be given to exosystems, macrosystems, and chronosystems (Smith & Hamon, 2022).

Several scholars affirm a strengths approach to leadership, as well. Griffith (2021) highlighted the need to place staff in positions where they will be successful in achieving the organization's goals, suggesting that strengths should be paramount. Koltz & Odegard (2020) and Gonaim (2016) advise chairs to focus on asking employees to do more of what they are already doing well. Focusing on strengths enhances self-efficacy and elevates work performance, encouraging employees to utilize their gifts to accomplish the task or objective.

Chairs adopting systems and strengths perspectives are advantaged. These frameworks help them recognize the important contributions individual attributes make toward the whole. They also help chairs to be cognizant of and capitalize upon the gifts and abilities represented in their department while acknowledging that a unique entity is created depending upon the compilation of team players. Department systems are always changing and adapting due to the addition and departure of members. As a result, student recruitment efforts and faculty hires need to be particularly strategic to best represent the diversity of experience and expertise desired, while thinking about the contribution to the whole or new entity created. Well-functioning systems establish rules and communication patterns which facilitate attainment of system goals or department missions even as change occurs, so attention to these dynamics is important.

Relative to limitations, some might argue that adopting a strengths perspective is pollyannaish, too much of a rose-colored lens. Some might also suggest that deep-seated problems or conflict might need more aggressive, incisive action than a strengths perspective allows. Regarding systems theory, James and colleagues (2018) suggest that it needs to include greater sensitivity to race, ethnicity, gender, social class, and sexual orientation. Department chairs need to consider the best ways to center these concerns within departmental systems. For me, they have been part of the overall composition of the system's membership. White et al. (2015) also believe that systems theory concepts are too vague for testing. So, it might be challenging to measure departmental boundaries, or the super-entity created with

the addition and deletion of department members (faculty, adjunct instructors, students, alumni) over time. While there are strengths and limitations to the lenses afforded by systems theory and family strengths perspective, chairs benefit by being cognizant of theories which shape their practice.

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Family Science Review, Volume 28, Issue 2, 2024

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