

This presentation reports the process of development of a community of practice for the heads of department in a university in Colombia, South America. According to Wenger and Wenger (2016), a community of practice is a group of people who associate to develop a collective learning process focused on sharing an expertise, exploring new techniques or establishing a support network to face challenges. In this sense, communities of practice are instrumental to foster the development of skills and competences that academic leaders should have to fulfill their roles. These skills are framed under the academic leadership approach (Buller, 2015) that seeks to primarily strengthen skills such as effective planning, effective communication, conflict management, among others, to establish an appropriate organizational and academic climate that promotes the teaching development of the group of teachers in charge. Using document analysis, members of the community analyzed the sessions they have participated in from 2016 to 2020 to characterize the nature of the activities developed by the group, the purposes as well as the products and gains obtained from being part of the community. Analysis of data show the progressive change of purpose of the group from meetings whose main purpose was mainly informative in nature (i.e learning about the position descriptions, staff evaluation processes), to sessions where heads were asked to give feedback about institutional processes, to others where the purpose was the development of skills and competences needed for their role as heads of department. The analysis shows as well how as the community developed, their members showed more agency in the selection of themes and activities that responded to their needs as a community of practice.

In this presentation the audience will learn how the community of practice (known as FOCUS at the institutional level) has been consolidated as a learning space socially enriched by an empathetic interaction that has allowed the construction of positive relationships among its participants. As a community, they have forged an identity and a shared experience where the particular experiences and stories of its participants are established as guidelines or lines of work for addressing situations and solving everyday problems from this role. At present (2022), Focus has decided to address the construction and design of consultation resources on topics related to the management of the role of the department head as a strategy to facilitate access and consultation with others, based on the reality and particularities of this practice. Likewise, the community established an additional working group where recently appointed department chairs (Focus Novel) participate, who, under the dynamics of a book club, reflect and dialogue on the characteristics, opportunities and challenges of this profile (the group is working on the book "A toolkit for department chair" Buller and Cipriano, 2015). From 2016 to date, this scenario of work, interaction and collaboration has received the accompaniment and support of the Center for Teaching Excellence of the Universidad del Norte, an academic unit that promotes the construction of spaces for pedagogical teacher training.