Introduction

This Knowledge Area Module (KAM) focuses on macro-level conceptions of social organizations, institutions, and systems that cut across a number of academic disciplines. A review of the literature on social systems theory and systems thinking offers a wide variety of concepts and models for looking at problems in their complete environment. Rather than isolating one part of a problem, trying to solve it, and putting it back into the system, the systems approach attempts to adopt a larger scope by studying the interaction among different parts of a system. Systems theory offers us a critical thinking framework, one of many you will develop as a doctoral student. You will become familiar with the wide range of approaches used to study changing social systems, from philosophical speculations to mathematically derived theoretical formulations. The day-to-day events that shape our professional lives occur within the context of larger systemic processes. These events both transform and conform to the larger systems of which they are part. As you work through this KAM, pay special attention to this bilateral relationship between the larger society and your own profession.

The biologist Ludwig von Bertalanffy proposed general systems theory in the 1940s. Von Bertalanffy was both reacting against reductionism (the tendency to seek simple answers to complex problems) and attempting to find unification between the social sciences and the physical sciences. The fundamental notion of general systems theory is that real systems are open to and interact with their environments and that they can acquire new properties through these ongoing interactions.
There is a variety of system-oriented approaches. Whether you are considering a cybernetic model, field theory, or a simulation design, your focus should directly relate to your own past experiences, present position, or future plans. You should enhance your knowledge by familiarizing yourself with the rich multidisciplinary literature in current journals, periodicals, and research reports that apply systems thinking to real world problems.

Overall Objectives of This KAM

The purpose of this KAM is to help you critically evaluate various perspectives on systems theory and apply these theories to actual problems and policies in your specific professional settings. Theories of social systems directly affect you, your community, and your colleagues. A critical evaluation of social systems theories is a necessary prerequisite for successfully implementing plans and policies. Thus, this module serves as an important link between theory and practice, research and application, and abstraction and specificity and provides the broad, systems context for your advanced professional studies.

In the course of completing this KAM, you will:

1. Evaluate a wide variety of system-oriented, theoretical approaches to social issues.

2. Critically examine current research to develop the ability to look at your profession and/or organization and its problems and challenges from a systems perspective.

3. Apply systems techniques and methods to a specific problem within your profession or organization.
Plan to accomplish #1 in the Breadth, #2 in the Depth, and #3 in the Application component.

Challenges and Opportunities in This KAM

The key to researching and writing this KAM is to accept its basic premise, which is that the world is systemic in the sense that each of its parts connects to other smaller and larger parts. As humans, we are members of groups, organizations, a nation (or nations), and the global community. Likewise, we consist of organs, which contain molecules, made up of atoms, and so on. This systems perspective inescapably raises questions about the effect we have on our environment and vice versa. The same is true of our organizations. Do they operate in a vacuum, or do they affect their environments and vice versa?

In the Breadth component, you will critically explore general theories of systems and systems thinking to gain an appreciation of the true nature of social systems. In the process, you will learn about general systems theory, open systems theory, systems thinking, and other theoretical systems constructs. Perhaps you will find some common ground amongst them and develop a creative synthesis that will guide your thinking about systems in the rest of the KAM and beyond.

In the Depth component, you will examine the role that these systems frameworks and their associated techniques and methods play in your profession. Based on a critical review of the literature, you will compare and contrast various systems-oriented approaches to illuminating or resolving important issues in your area of professional practice. From this in-depth evaluation of the systems tools that others in your profession
have used, you may identify some that work particularly well or develop a new approach that combines the best features of existing techniques and methods.

In the Application component, you will apply systems concepts and tools from the Breadth and Depth to a specific issue confronting your profession or an organization with which you are familiar. This is where you will demonstrate that you understand the principles and methods of social systems by using them to analyze a concrete situation and make recommendations for improvement.

As you develop your KAM, you will need to weave the three components of your KAM together seamlessly around an integrative concept or theme. You will also need to demonstrate higher-order thinking skills (e.g., analysis, synthesis, evaluation) throughout.

Breadth Component

SBSF 8310 Theories of Social Systems (5 cr.)

The purpose of the Breadth component of this KAM is to develop an intensified awareness of the power of systems theory to deepen your understanding of our world and its people, institutions, and organizations. In your integrated demonstration, you could explore the historical development, philosophical underpinnings, and/or present state of systems theory, as well as compare and contrast different viewpoints and scholarly contributions to systems theory by examining their underlying assumptions and broad implications. Besides demonstrating your knowledge of key systems concepts and theories and your ability to analyze their internal coherence and validity, you could synthesize them, if appropriate, into a coherent view of social systems.

Your reading for the Breadth component will familiarize you with the fundamentals of systems theory and systems analysis as applied to society as a whole or
to its subsystems, such as institutions, organizations, and professions. For example, one of the basic tenets of systems theory is that all social systems, including organizations or professions, are dynamic in nature and have a symbiotic relationship with the environment in which they exist. To the extent that everything within a subsystem connects with everything else within it, if one element fails or falters, the whole system (or subsystem) fails or falters.

Some suggested themes for the Breadth component are:

1. Write a position paper critically assessing a number of systems theories based on your analysis of the theoretical constructs in this knowledge area. Explain which theory you find the most valid. Compare and contrast the assumptions and ramifications of these various systems views of the world.

2. Imagine that you are a participant in a symposium titled “A Systems View of the World,” involving several major contributors to the theoretical and conceptual knowledge base addressed in this KAM (they need not be contemporaries). Base your hypothetical positions on documented material. Write up the proceedings of the symposium. Include your own presentation and response in the report. Explain why certain theories are more valid than others. Compare and contrast these theories by having the contributors respond to one another where appropriate. Focus on analyzing theoretical and conceptual positions and synthesizing various system theories.

Demonstration of Competence

The expected length of the paper for the Breadth component is approximately 30 double-spaced pages, plus references
Learning Resources

A bibliography of possible references for this KAM can be found at the Walden Library site accessed through the faculty or student personal start page/campuscruiser. Once in the Walden Library site, click on Get KAM Research Help and look for the appropriate program or KAM. The Resources links will take you to general references that will provide an overview of the field or key thinkers. The Bibliography link will take you to a list of possible writings. The books and authors listed here are meant only to provide examples of the kind of literature you should be accessing. You can compile your own bibliographic references using this list as a starting point. If you have difficulty compiling a bibliography or choosing relevant readings, consult with your faculty mentor or KAM assessor and the Walden librarians.

Depth Component

EDUC 8327 Current Research on Social Systems and Change in Higher Education (5 cr.)

Unlike the Breadth component, where you demonstrate your critical assessment of systems theory, the emphasis in the Depth component is on critical analysis of development using systems theory and concepts as described in the research literature. The purpose of this component is to help you develop intellectual and analytical abilities to look at an aspect of higher education organizations and its problems and challenges from a systems perspective.

To complete the Depth component of KAM 3 successfully, you will demonstrate your understanding of how researchers use systems theory to analyze the structures, process, problems, and prospects in higher education. Hence, you must familiarize yourself with the existing research literature that pertains to systems theory and your
profession. Building on systems theory, some suggested topics for the Depth component are:

1. The nature of the relationships within the units responsible for retention (or other initiative) in higher education (admissions, financial aid, other student services, academic programs, etc.)

2. The structure of reporting lines, the flow of information and decisions, and their impact on the effectiveness of an organization.

3. Approaches to bringing together the various stakeholders in a college or university.

4. The possibilities and impediments in sharing reform efforts in a higher education consortium.

5. Conflict resolution between administration/management and staff.

6. Ethnic or other subcultures in an institution of higher learning—hearing their voice and meeting their needs.

7. What are the “public” aspects of the public university?

**Demonstration of Competence**

Compile an annotated bibliography of systems-oriented literature relevant to your profession and/or organization. This bibliography must include at least 15 sources drawn primarily from recent articles in peer-reviewed or refereed professional journals or edited volumes. After reading the sources, provide a brief summary and critical analysis of each article. Arrange the bibliographies in alphabetical order by author.

Use the research reflected in your bibliography to write a 25-30 page double-spaced typed scholarly paper describing, analyzing, and explaining the selected systems
issue and relating it to developments in higher education. In this paper, be sure to include evidence of higher order thinking (comparison and contrast, analysis, and evaluation).

Learning Resources

You should do a literature search to identify current research on your topic. This might be supplemented with more general texts about current developments in the field to include in the essay you will write. You may find that researchers use a systems analysis without calling it that explicitly.

Application Component

EDUC 8337 Professional Practice in Social Systems and Change: Higher Education
(4 cr.)

In the Application section of this KAM, you will demonstrate an ability to examine, and take measures to resolve, clearly identified organizational and/or professional problems using a systems approach. You are to demonstrate understanding of the assumptions and methods of systems research, as well as critical awareness of the range of applicability of systems theories and approaches. It is highly recommended that you focus on a project that you are familiar with to enable you to perform detailed analyses and offer concrete suggestions for improvement.

Demonstration of Competence

To complete your Application component, describe a concrete and specific organizational and/or professional problem. Once you have delineated the problem, critically identify systemic causes and consequences of the problem and prescribe a systematic response to solve it. In other words, examine changes in the prevailing structural conditions in the internal or external environment of the organization and/or
profession. Remember to secure Institutional Review Board approval to conduct research using human subjects.

To complete this component of the KAM successfully, you might consider one of the following options:

1. Using the bibliography developed in the preceding section as a base and using a systems approach, develop an analysis of a problem situation in your selected context and propose a solution. You may need to examine the history of the institution and consult various stakeholders in the organization to identify the particular needs of the organization. Suggest not only what solutions you would propose but how you would implement those solutions and measure their effectiveness.

2. Identify an instance of a systems-based approach that has proven to be particularly effective and explain how it was implemented and what made it effective. You may need to interview key stakeholders, examine notes and plans made along the way, and observe the operations of the organization.

3. Identify and analyze critical factors affecting faculty and staff performance and organizational behavior.

4. Discuss and apply theoretical principles about social systems and individuals to a specific practice (such as assessment of student learning) in higher education.

5. Select or design concrete interventions for change, assessment, or improvement for specific organizational components.

6. Submit a major work you have previously completed that demonstrates your ability to apply systems thinking to complex problems (e.g., master’s thesis,
curriculum design, professional project). Critically examine the project in terms of
the extent to which it has or should reflect a systems-oriented approach.

Learning Resources

With the approval of your faculty assessor, select the resources that apply systems
thinking appropriate to your project.