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Introduction

Let me tell you something you already know. The world ain't all sunshine and rainbows. It's a very mean and nasty place, and I don't care how tough you are, it will beat you to your knees and keep you there permanently if you let it. Life's not about how hard of a hit you can give, it's about how many you can take, and still keep moving forward. – Rocky Balboa

The resilience of Sylvester Stallone’s character, Rocky Balboa, strikes a chord within me. In the initial Rocky film, as a prize-fighter, Rocky was initially viewed by the “experts” as a joke. Their rationale? He was a blue-collar guy with no professional connections, who worked on the docks of Philadelphia, my home-town, as a butcher and as a debt-collector for area loan-sharks. His native accent and unassuming mannerisms earned him the label of an underdog by many. It was not his right hook that made Rocky a champion; it was his resilience when facing adversity that captured the hearts and respect of people. It is this particular character trait that I strongly identify with.

Resilience is described by *Psychology Today* (n.d) as “that ineffable quality that allows some people to be knocked down by life and come back stronger than ever. They view failure as positive feedback. Rather than letting failure overcome them and drain their resolve, they find a way to rise from the ashes.” Likewise, in the following statement, authors Feldman and Kravetz (2014) describe people who overcame considerable life experiences:

Trauma survivors eventually recover and bounce back which is attributed to *resiliency*. However, a small number of trauma survivors do more than just recover, rather, they bounce forward, refocusing their energies on a new calling, a new mission, or a new path. They help others, pursue legal reforms, or embark on other lofty goals. We call such people supersurviviors.

Similar to Rocky, I too started my career path later in life and rose from the ashes. It is for this reason as well as being a woman who has reached middle-age, that my reflections cannot be limited by my experiences in the doctoral program. Instead, my reflections are filtered through my life’s experiences and have intermingled with collaboration, scholarship, and unique insight. This paper provides a comprehensive assessment of my professional and educational practice through coursework and related experiences. In addition, I illustrate of how these experiences have equipped me to commence writing my dissertation. My portfolio and artifacts supporting my coursework within my program of study is located within my Portfolio PowerPoint.

As a first-generation college student, I was not encouraged by my parents or school counselors to attend college nor did I have any direction in choosing a career. After ending an abusive marriage in my twenties, I realized that a college education would enable me to better provide for my son and make our life less of a struggle, so I entered the ring. Similar to amateur boxers who struggle to learn their craft, I too persevered as I knew that the more education that I obtain, more doors will open, so, I obtained an undergraduate degree and then a Master degree in Special Education. Drawing on my own life experiences, I harbored a strong desire to teach students with learning and/or economic disabilities that they too can accomplish whatever goal or dream that they desire, no matter what limitations others may try to impose upon them.

The most important outcome of my significant challenges was not developing a “fighting instinct” nor was it my subsequent academic success; rather, the most significant outcome was how the presence of God combined with higher education radically changed me. I fell in love with learning and thirsted for more. I developed higher-level thinking skills and developed the confidence to shape the future of my son in a more powerful way. Although the experiences that I encountered were traumatic, I saw them as a tool that enabled me to obtain a heightened sense of empathy, compassion, and most of all, *resilience*.

**Becoming a Doctoral Student and Surviving.**

In 2015, my craving to learn and to better myself led to a subsequent Master degree in Leadership Studies. Dr. Dennis Anderson expressed to me that my master thesis was one of the best papers that was submitted for grading. His praise and my growing confidence prompted me to consider applying for entrance to the Ed.D. program for Public School Leadership. Prior to the program interview, I understood that many of the candidates and those already in the program were already successful in their respective fields for *years*. At this point in my life, what career accomplishments have I achieved that would make me a desirable applicant? *Nothing*.

With an impending sense of doom, I followed Dr. Cunningham into the conference room. Needless to say, the interview was enlightening. My eyes were opened and reality quickly set in. I came to the realization that *I really did not know* what long-term career goals that I had in mind. I surmised that peer collaboration combined with the rigorous and intensive courses offered in the Ed.D. program would guide me in the path that was intended for me to follow.

After I learned that I was accepted into the program, I immediately began to assess my ability to cope with the significant demands at home, work, and now as a doctoral student. With these challenges in mind, I recognized that in order to be successful in my academic pursuits, my husband and I made adjustments so that I could balance my family and work responsibilities without becoming overwhelmed. Additional challenges that I encountered was the inner battle that I anticipated when I initially stepped into my first doctoral class. I confess that I was overwhelmed and intimidated. Thoughts raced through my mind that were seeped in self-doubt. Am I smart enough? Would I embarrass myself? Do I possess the stamina that prizefighters must possess to obtain my goal? I began to question my rationale to obtain my doctorate; however, the incredible support that I received from both faculty and peers reinforced the stamina, drive, and intellect that is necessary to obtain a terminal degree, so I pressed forward and never looked back.

**Collaboration**

**With discipline, belief, and the right knowledge, we become the best that we can be. – Rocky Balboa**

Although a number of students dropped out of the program (as predicted by Dr. Eagle at my cohort’s initial seminar), those whom remained in my cohort-which was small- developed an intimate community which to this day remains immensely supportive. We are united not only by our friendship, but also by our collective goal to win the final bout together. Having the opportunity to collaborate and learn alongside fellow students who were already in positions of leadership in law enforcement, school administrators, and in higher education enriched my learning experience in regard to leadership roles. It is not the coursework in the program that provide answers, rather, it is my peers within my cohort who have provided me with a curriculum that consist of years of real-world experience, thoughtful insights, and a wealth of resources about various leadership issues and strategies on how to solve them.

**Course Development**

Since there has been a significant rise of K-12 students receiving special education services (U.S. Department of Education, 2016), school administrators are required to demonstrate sufficient knowledge of special education law. In the summer of 2016, Dr. Damron gave me the opportunity to assist her in developing LS 780, Leadership of Special Populations **(Collaboration Artifact 1)**. I assisted Dr. Damron in designing specific components of the syllabus and researching appropriate course-related literature. As a teacher of special education students, I have encountered many school administrators and faculty members who lack sufficient knowledge about the components of IDEA, twice-exceptional students, etc., which is necessary to equip school leaders in an age of active legal and civil litigation. This opportunity permitted me to contribute vital information to school leaders so that they may serve their respective student population to the best of their ability.

**Co-Teaching**

Continuing into the summer of 2016, Dr. Damron and I continued our collaboration by co-teaching LS 610, School Improvement, together. I found this to be very challenging, as I had no prior experience with the various administrative functions in Blackboard; however, after I gained proficiency in Blackboard, I relished it. Initially, there were a few students who were not happy with my comments on their assignments. I learned from Dr. Damron how to professionally express my comments, grade assignments in a timely manner on Blackboard, and to take specific steps to ensure student integrity in their submission of assignments.

**Qualtrics Surveys**

In my pursuit to become a well-rounded doctoral student, I actively sought out members of the faculty for additional professional/academic opportunities. I was presented with an opportunity that would serve a number of faculty members. My task was to convert two sets of surveys-seven in all, which included surveys of recent graduate students from various programs within the university (e.g. library media specialist and math through algebra I students), and surveys of employers of recent Marshall University graduates. Before I embarked on this endeavor, I had no prior experience with Qualtrics. I was referred by Dr. Nicholson to fellow doctoral student, Gregg MacAllister, who provided quick assistance to me. I saw this very challenging opportunity as a blessing a significant number of public schools are utilizing this program. I now possess sufficient knowledge of a tool which enables me to produce professional, quantitative surveys which I will use for my dissertation research **(Collaboration Artifact 2**).

**Scholarship**

I stopped thinking the way that other people think a long time ago. You gotta think like you think. - Rocky Balboa

**Writing**

One of the goals of the doctoral program is to produce students who are reflective, ethical educators and researchers who contribute to the field of education (Marshall Doctoral Handbook, 2012), p.5). Up until Dr. Nicholson’s LS 705 class, I surmised that my writing was average. After I received my first grade assignment, my false illusions about my writing skills got a swift dose of reality which was hand-delivered by Dr. Nicholson; especially when she referred me to the Writing Center! Ouch. Briefly, I wondered if I could survive this course and was I tough enough to finish out this round. In spite of this humbling experience, I viewed Dr. Nicholson’s critique as a teachable moment which will enable me to write at the highest academic level.

Throughout my doctoral experience, Dr. Nicholson has been one of the prominent ringside coaches throughout my doctoral experience. She has pushed me to strive for excellence- including writing at the doctoral level. Her jabs were never below the belt and were always fair. She challenged me to become a more proficient writer through honest feedback and weekly reflection journals. This process enabled me to express my thoughts more fluidly while appreciating the process of writing and the value of revision. Under Dr. Nicholson’s guidance, my writing greatly improved. Dr. Nicholson held my classmates and I to the highest academic standard, and rightly so. Do not academia and professional journals require similar standards?

**Statistics**

When I learned that I was required to take EDF 517, I was very apprehensive as I find advanced math to be very abstract; especially at this level. However, Dr. Meisel quickly put my fears to rest **(Scholarship Artifact 1**).With the support of my peers and one of my program favorite texts, Salkind’s *Statistics for People Who (Think They Hate Statistics*) (2014), I not only survived the course, but understood the concepts and which approach should be applied in research projects. I was able to read research articles in subsequent classes with a heightened appreciation and understanding of the results that were discussed and their implication.

This past spring, I took LS 776 with Dr. Securro. This was perhaps one of my hardest classes. Although I have grown more comfortable with computer applications, at the start of this class, I felt akin to a dinosaur. Once I got past the seemingly endless features and options on SPSS, I realized that the knowledge that I gained from Dr. Meisel’s course helped me to understand the next step (SPSS) in gathering and interpreting my research data. At times, I found SPSS to be overwhelming by the numerous ways it can desegregate data; however, I am grateful for the speed and efficiency of the program. I feel that the course taught me what I need to know, however, I am still not as confident as I would like to be, so, for this reason, I will collaborate with someone who is highly proficient with statistics and SPSS.

**Regional Conference**

Similar to many of my cohort peers, I was anxious about fulfilling the required components of my portfolio with artifacts. In the summer of 2016, I received an email from Dr. Hisiro seeking proposals for the upcoming national Southern Regional Council on Educational Administration (SRCEA) conference in nearby Charleston*.* Needless to say, I was pumped. In fact, I was so excited, I presented *twice*; one presentation at the poster session and another at the paper session. For the former, I collaborated with Dr. Damron, and presented a poster that pertained to leadership challenges in preK-12 education: ***Why Don’t Parents Participate? Educator Perspectives***. My presentation featured statistical data and educator perceptions pertaining to the prevalent trend of parents who are not actively engaged in their child’s education. As an educator and a future leader, this topic was close to my heart as the lack of parental involvement is prevalent. After two weeks, I submitted a proposal which was approved **(Collaboration Artifact 3),** and another few weeks to develop and produce a poster.

For the latter presentation- the paper session, I collaborated with another Marshall University Faculty member, Dr. Bethel. After an initial meeting and numerous emails, I submitted an initial proposal, however, after a few days, I contacted Dr. Hisiro and asked that it be withdrawn and replaced with another topic. My rationale for my request was not a lack of merit of my initial topic; rather, it was attributed to a specific passion for me, as an outsider and as an educational leader, to better understand the factors that inhibit the educational outcomes of public school students. I contacted Dr. Bethel and shared with him my revised proposal and my visual presentation.

At the conference, I was very nervous, however, after encouragement from Dr. Bethel, I began my presentation, *Why K-12 Educational Outcomes and Education Matter in Rural States* **(Collaboration Artifact 4)**. In my presentation, I found that the data that I shared was interesting and meaningful to conference attendees. This was manifested by conversation among the attendees sharing their experiences and opinions of the various factors that prevent academic achievement among their respective students and communities. The feedback that I received from both Marshall University faculty and attendees was very encouraging. I gained confidence in presenting to an audience and I was excited that I was able to contribute to the profession.

**Leadership**

Nothing is real if you don’t believe who you are.- Rocky Balboa

**Leadership Theory**

During my first semester, I was enrolled in LS 710, Principals of Leadership, which was taught by Dr. Louis Watts. In this challenging course, we identified the features of the major theories and models of leadership **(Leadership Artifact 1)** through reading James MacGregor Burns’ book *Leadership* (1978), visual presentations, and other additional activities. We were challenged to see ourselves as leaders and to identify which characteristics are attributed to good leadership. Each week, we read a literary work and penned a reflection on each work in regards to leadership. In this course, I learned that my leadership style is a combination of two theories-servant leadership and transformational leadership. The former approach develops people, provide vision, and gain trust from their followers. The latter strives to build commitment to organizational goals and empowers subordinates to accomplish them (Stone, Russel & Patterson, 2003). I strongly identify with each approach as I strive to bring out the best qualities in my students and my colleagues as I am a strong proponent for personal and professional empowerment. This course was eye-opening for me as its components provided me numerous opportunities to reflect on my skill sets as a leader and the career path that I want to follow.

In Dr. Nicholson’s two classes, LS 705 (Administrative Theory) and LS 707 (Ethical Theories), the critical thinking skills of my cohort was sharpened. In these two classes, we analyzed and discussed a variety of administrative and ethical theories and their application to schools and society itself. Through conversations about leaders and the decisions they have made and through the lens of theorists, such as Marx and Engels, we investigated the core foundations that contribute to critical decisions made by historical figures which have influenced society. The most significant discovery that I encountered was how I, as a teacher, contribute to the cyclical economic and political status quo. I was also shocked that my belief stems from Marxism. This discovery has made me radically realign my teaching pedagogy through a different lens by not adhering to the prescribed system of viewing students as a means to obtain a healthy graduate rate. For our final project, I chose to examine the conduct of Holocaust hero, Oskar Schindler, using Michael Walzer’s dirty hands as a framework for my analysis **(Leadership Artifact 2)**.

**Doctoral Seminar (2017)**

Another professional/ academic activity that I am currently involved with is serving as a member of the doctoral committee for the upcoming doctoral seminar on September 30, 2017. As a committee member, my roles are to 1) serve to as a faculty liaison and 2) as a co-chair overseeing volunteers on the day of the seminar. The takeaway from this activity is leadership and collaborative experience gained from working with my peers and faculty and providing an enriching academic experience for incoming doctoral students **(Leadership Artifact 3)**.

**Research**

The mind is your best muscle. Big arms can move rocks, but big words move mountains.- Rocky Balboa

I was privileged to have Dr. Michael Cunningham as the instructor of the LS 703 class, Research Design. This course challenged us to discover our philosophical worldview and how it would shape our approach to our imminent dissertation research. I discovered that my research philosophy was mainly pragmatic with a dose of constructivism. We learned how to distinguish between qualitative and quantitative research design through readings, reflections, and critiquing a variety of research proposals. The purpose of the latter activity was two-fold: not only did we have to distinguish the design of each proposal, we learned to identify the strengths and weaknesses of each one. I found this very helpful in understanding the necessary components of a reliable research design. I really enjoyed the round-table discussions of the text and of our assignments. Our final assignment for the class was a research proposal of our anticipated dissertation topic. **(Research Artifact 1)**.

**Survey**

In the summer of 2016, I took Dr. Childress’ class, EDF 711, which is similar to LS 703. In this class, we concentrated on quantitative research and reviewed a variety of studies. This class taught me the process of developing a survey and reminded me on how to obtain IRB approval through CITI online modules. I already completed the initial IRB in LS 703, so I only had to take the refresher module. Our final project was designing a complete survey with a scoring instrument. I based my quantitative, cross-sectional survey upon my research proposal from LS 703, so, I found this task to be relatively simple to accomplish.

**Qualitative Study**

This summer, I took EDF 625, Qualitative Research, which was taught by Dr. Elizabeth Campbell and Dr. Eric Lassiter. At first, I was apprehensive, as transcription was required and I had no prior transcribing experience. My perspective changed shortly thereafter due to the literature that the instructors provided. The literature combined with my great interest in learning about people and their stories helped to overcome my trepidation. I learned of the different approaches that are associated with qualitative research and its applications towards my own research, the process of transcribing interviews, how to interpret themes that arise from our interview (s), and so on. Our last assignment, drawing from material from the Schwandt (2007) text, and from our previously assigned interview reflection log and transcript, helped to prepare me for my mixed-methods study **(Research Artifact 2)**.

**Finance**

During the summer and fall of 2016**,** I took LS 720 and LS 725; both taught by Dr. Bethel. In LS 720, our course work consisted of writing article reviews pertaining to higher education finance, a group assignment of which each group were assigned three states to compare the financial structure of each state’s public education system, a case study, and an analytical paper. Among the many takeaways that I learned from this course was identifying trends within public education systems and achieving a greater understanding of relationships among finances, mission, and governance. Similar to LS 720, in LS 725, we examined core concepts in the financing and economics of higher education through weekly article reviews, an analytical paper, and a comprehensive case study of a higher institution of learning.

**Scholarly Reading**

During the fall of 2016, I took LS 745 Higher Education Law with Dr. Early. The various course activities included weekly readings of intricate summaries of case, statutory, and constitutional law and their effect upon the policies of higher educational institutions. We were required to write a reflection for each of our readings. Although I am familiar with specific components of public school law; specifically special education law, reading the extensive and intricate case law articles was initially hard, and translating the judicial components into a summary to be even harder, but it got better as the semester progressed. Writing legal summaries enhanced my critical thinking skills and prompted me to respond through the lens of a leader. My knowledge of specific topics of litigation, such LGBT rights, sexual assault cases, and concealed weapons on campus were enhanced and I gained greater insight and appreciation of how these cases have caused significant policy changes on public school campuses.

**Reflection on the Rubric**

The purpose of this paper is to have articulated my competence to advance to the next step of dissertation research and writing. In this paper, I hope that I have expressed my personal and academic growth and have documented in each area of the Doctoral Portfolio Rubric: Collaboration, Scholarship, Research, Depth of Understanding, Reflection, and Communication.

In preceding sections of this paper and in my collection of artifacts, I have identified the areas of collaboration, scholarship, and research. I have provided evidence of collaboration with my cohort peers in various course activities and with a faculty member in teaching and course development. I have and continue to collaborate with other doctoral students and faculty in planning the upcoming student/faculty seminar. In the area of scholarship, I have provided evidence of collaboration with faculty for regional presentations. I have also presented examples of my two years of coursework.

Depth of Understanding is established in this reflection paper. I have blended my two years of coursework into one document that correlate my academic experiences and my personal and professional growth; more importantly, it demonstrates my competence as a more competent researcher at the highest academic level. I have expressed my background and my ensuing doubts prior to beginning the doctoral program; as well as the skills that I have developed and sharpened through rigorous coursework and collaboration; of which all has provided me with the ability and confidence to be ready for the next step. As I advanced through the program, I have made mistakes and have learned from them in part from my cohort peers, supportive faculty, and self-reflection. Quite honestly, the individual who has emerged at the end of this program is radically different from the program interview.

I have been transformed from an impulsive and uncertain individual to one who analyzes issues and research at a much deeper and at a more reflective level. I have learned to think deeper, write on a level that is appropriate on the doctoral level; although I know that there is room for growth in this area, collaborate with my cohort classmates as well as faculty, and demonstrate scholarship in professional and academic activities. My communication abilities are demonstrated in this paper, my delivery of my accompanying visual presentation, the development of my portfolio website, the delivery of my visual presentation, and the presentation of my artifacts.

**The Last Round**

Going in one more round when you don’t think you can -that’s what makes the difference in your life.

Rocky Balboa

Looking back on my journey in this program, it has not been easy. I reflect upon my interview to gain entry in the program and marvel at the various ways that I have been transformed through the collaboration of those within my cohort, the rigorous course activities, scholarship, professional and academic activities, and the support and prodding of the faculty which has enabled me to reach this point. There have been many of my colleagues who have said that it is not worth it (including my principal), and view attaining an Ed.D. degree as a waste of time and money “you only get a slight increase to your pay;” however, I see it differently. I see it as transforming. My mind and skill sets are constantly engaged and challenged and I deeply appreciate the scholarly and professional opportunities to do so. There have been times that I briefly felt like throwing in the towel, but, I remind myself of the words of Confucius “our greatest glory is not falling, but in rising every time we fall.” Similar to a boxing match, I have to keep training, get back up, and be ready for the next round.

This program has been difficult and tested my endurance, but, it has prepared me; both intellectually and emotionally toward my final round. Each jab and weave brings me closer to the end of each round and closer towards the championship fight. The skill sets that I have learned through this program will not be discarded at the end of my dissertation; they will be with me for life. I have become a more enlightened person in numerous ways, and for that, I will always be very grateful.

**The Future**

I am not the richest, smartest, or most talented person in the world, but I succeed because I keep going, going, and going. - Rocky Balboa.

My extraordinary life experiences, my faith, the supportive network within my cohort and the faculty have been my motivation to prepare me for the final round of this program. Before I began this program, I believed that I was an advanced reader, a proficient writer, and an adequate researcher. As a progressed through the program, I learned how foolish I was to assume that I clearly did not possess the necessary knowledge and skills that accomplished doctoral student possess. Throughout this program, I acquired the skills that are necessary to create, develop, and implement the required procedures that are required to successfully complete a doctoral study.

The next step is to determine and then frame a research problem. In LS 703, my initial proposal addressed the factors that determine teacher motivation and job happiness in rural Appalachia; specifically West Virginia as there is not a wealth of research dedicated to this topic. Dr. Cunningham thought that my topic was a valid issue to research and I am considering staying with this topic. In the interim, I will be reflecting and determining other issues to pursue. The final bout will be very challenging, at times- tedious, and overwhelming. The ensuing reward will be very satisfying; not because of being awarded a doctoral degree, but because of the enriching experiences that will hone and strengthen my personal and professional capabilities.

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