“Morphing into a Doctoral Student”

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**INTRODUCTION**

“You may ask yourself, well, how did I get here?”

-*Once in a Lifetime* by Talking Heads

Since learning of the portfolio process within Marshall University’s Doctorate in Education program, I have dreaded it. Until I learned more background about the process and reviewed several examples from other students, the entire exercise seemed akin to a large form scrapbook accompanied by a paper of personal insights. What does this activity have to do with my understanding of higher education, I thought. As is often the case, though, things look different from far away, and my thoughts of developing my portfolio are now more than five years old. To my surprise, I have found this entire process of “looking back” over my involvement in the program to be productive and enjoyable. Beyond the obvious aspect of reflecting on many hours of coursework and hundreds of pages of writing, several initial thoughts have come to mind as a good starting place for this paper.

First and foremost, I am stunned that I kept so much of my work. From information related to the doctoral faculty/student seminars to obscure notes and class handouts, I reviewed all of my materials for this process. Handwritten notes, PowerPoint presentations and printed email correspondence gave me not only an interesting look back, but also an informed perspective on my progress and growth within the program. For instance, as a person with no academic background in education prior to entering this doctoral program, I found even the most rudimentary issues and acronyms to be a foreign language at first. Today, I feel conversant in the issues and language of education, but also recognize that I still have more to learn and will always want to add to and expand my knowledge of the subject.

**BECOMING A DOCTORAL STUDENT**

After I was accepted into the program to earn my doctorate, I quickly realized that I still knew very little about the actual program. In talking with other individuals who had earned their doctoral degree elsewhere, the process of earning your doctoral degree sounded more similar to hazing. With a largely unstructured process, it seemed that you were ready to graduate when the chair of your program “said so.” Life was put in proverbial limbo and was combined with the threat that you might never complete the program.

I had experienced some minor forms of academic hazing in my undergraduate and graduate degree programs, as well as during my time in the United States Army. In all these occasions, I found such treatment to have little to do with education and more to do with power dynamics and bullying. Fortunately, though, unlike the programs I had heard described by friends, the doctoral program that I had been accepted into did not believe in this hazing treatment.

*LS 719 – Introduction to Doctoral Studies* gave my fellow students and me an understanding of what was ahead of us and educated me in my lack of knowledge of the program to a large degree. The course and its content answered many of the questions I had as well as some other questions I had not considered. Any program that wants to work positively towards a higher graduation rate should consider the many benefits of this kind of one-hour course to start an academic program.

As with many doctoral students, changes occur in your personal and professional life as you work through the program. The greatest change connected to my studies in education was my promotion from Director of Communications at the South Charleston Campus to Chief of Staff/Senior Vice President of Communications for Marshall University. While this change did slow down my coursework for a short time, I continued to find that my courses were beneficial in my new role. Specific classes, such as *LS 626 – Institutional Advancement*, *LS 616 – Higher Education Governance*, and *LS 745 – Higher Education Law*, dealt with topics that I was also wrestling with as Chief of Staff. When confidentiality was not a factor, I was also able to share my professional experiences in these classes, which seemed to benefit my classmates as well.

Interestingly, one of the most beneficial courses to me in my role as Chief of Staff was a course I dreaded taking due to my lack of knowledge of finance and budgeting: *LS 725 – Higher Education Finance*. In my previous positions in state government and with an integrated marketing firm, I had been in charge of the budget process, but always found it to be laborious and frustrating. This course literally touched upon every aspect of higher education, as funding is a central part of every program at a university. I came away from the course far more confident in my abilities as an administrator and with a much better understanding of the budgeting process.

**AREA OF EMPHASIS**

For my Area of Emphasis with the doctoral program, I wanted to do something different from my main course of study and from the work I did for Marshall. I am more of a Liberal Arts person in my thinking and have always been fascinated with Appalachia and its people. I had met Dr. Eric Lassiter in my work at Marshall and found him to be a motivated and engaging professor. After discussing my interests with him, we jointly decided that a nine-hour exploration of ethnography and Appalachian culture would serve me well as a good Area of Emphasis.

While I never believed that Dr. Lassiter’s courses would be easy, I had no idea they would be so difficult for me. There was a great deal of reading and listening to audio programs in his initial course, *HUMN 600 – Introduction to the Study of the Humanities*. The class size was small and consisted of an interesting blend of students. For example, the most adept of us seemed to be the owner of a local bar and restaurant who, to my knowledge, wasn’t even in a degree program. He simply enjoyed learning and, in my opinion, was clearly very good at it. His insights into the material made great sense, but escaped me until after he would point them out. When I asked Dr. Lassiter for assistance in breaking this learning curve, he suggested I spend more time with the materials, which made a great deal of sense. As he explained, ethnography attempts to answer the “how” and “why” of people and cultures. It was similar to journalism in a way, but had tremendous depth and a huge volume of material to be digested by the researcher. While I enjoyed this course, I found it much more challenging than I would have expected.

My second Area of Emphasis course was even more challenging. I had moved from Huntington to Lexington, Kentucky, so attending a weekly class in South Charleston was a nearly impossible proposition for me. Dr. Lassiter was kind enough to allow me to register for an independent study that would consist of building “an exhaustive annotated bibliography on Appalachia and coal.” This topic was particularly relevant to me, as I had left my job with Marshall in February 2010 to become the President of the Kentucky Coal Association. I wanted to gain a better understanding of the different perspectives towards the industry I now represented, and I hoped this course would allow me to gain this information.

Unfortunately, my knowledge as to how to construct an annotated bibliography was limited at best. Additionally, I made the naïve decision to initially lump the materials into a simple “for or against” grouping, which was rightly criticized by Dr. Lassiter as failing to find the sophistication of the different perspectives. These mistakes by me were in no way Dr. Lassiter’s fault, and I greatly appreciated him turning these painful realizations into “teachable moments” for me. After an extension of the independent study into a second semester, I was able to complete the assignment to some level of success.

The final course for my Area of Emphasis was a second independent study, this time with Al Cross, a University of Kentucky (UK) professor. A veritable legend in journalism in Kentucky and a retired reporter from *The Louisville Courier-Journal*, Cross splits his time between teaching and managing the Institute for Rural Journalism, which is located on UK’s Lexington Campus. In working with Cross, we explored circulation trends involving weekly newspapers in rural Kentucky and West Virginia, specifically focusing on Appalachia and its readership demographics.

Mixed methods of research were used, ranging from a review of each newspaper’s *United States Postal Form 3526* to gather subscription data to interviews with publishers and editors in both states. Based on the data gained from the postal forms combined with information from the United States Census, we looked for significant trends through statistical analysis and found several trends that were in conflict with what we called the “conventional wisdom” of the leadership of these rural newspapers. We have presented our findings to the Appalachian Studies Association during the 2011 Spring Semester and to the National Newspaper Association Convention in Albuquerque, New Mexico.

Much like Dr. Lassiter’s independent study, this course was extended into a third semester as we completed all of Cross’ goals for the course. It has been more work than I expected for a three-hour course, but I have also found it challenging and insightful to present an academic paper outside of my course of study.

**COMPONENTS OF THE PORTFOLIO**

In the meantime, as part of the portfolio process, I completed several projects related to my study of higher education. These projects included submitting a paper and presenting to the Southern Regional Council on Educational Administration (SRCEA) with Dr. Anderson, assisting in the redevelopment of *LS 724 – Organizational Analysis*, developing an online graduate-level course entitled *Higher Education Public Relations* for Marshall’s School of Journalism, and a Communications Plan for the doctoral program itself.

During the 2008 SRCEA Annual Conference in Charleston, West Virginia, I had the opportunity to present a paper with Dr. Anderson. We chose our topic based on recent events involving the presidency of West Virginia University (WVU) and its selection of Michael Garrison, a lawyer who had previously served as Chief of Staff for West Virginia Governor Bob Wise. Garrison had been selected through a process that many critics described as overly political. He resigned as president of WVU in less than a year. Our paper, entitled “Is the Nature of Presidential Leadership Changing?” explored the hiring of non-academics as presidents; the cultural “fit” of certain skill sets to the position of president, and what search committees should look for in the future.

*Reflection –* This experience was my first time presenting a paper in academic setting. While I was expecting a somewhat one-way form of communication – presenter to audience – followed by challenging questions, the entire process was more a discussion of our topic and the topics of our fellow presenters. This collaborative atmosphere not only eased my nerves, but also made the entire experience more productive.

Most of the presenters were other doctoral students, so there was a combination of mutual respect and genuine interest in the subject matter. Another aspect of presenting this paper that was surprising to me was my relationship with my co-author, Dr. Dennis Anderson. While he serves as chair of doctoral committee and a member of the faculty at Marshall, the writing of the paper and its presentation were completed as peers, which allowed me to express my ideas and reactions to our research freely.

The next project in my portfolio also had me working with Dr. Anderson as well as a fellow doctoral student, Joann Viksjo in rebuilding the *Organizational Analysis* course for the doctoral program. We separated the course into sections by subject matter and began our research for the necessary materials. I selected sections involving *Organizational Life Cycle*, *Contingency Planning*, *Assessing External Markets*, *Internal Communication Audits*, *Measuring for Success*, and *Power and Politics*. After reviewing existing research related to these sections, I collected various materials that I believed would give the students taking the rebuilt course an understanding of the topics. Interestingly, many of the sections related closely to my work and education in public relations and politics, in addition to my training with the United States Army. Once a substantive amount of materials were collected, we drafted case studies for each section to be used as the correlating assignments to the reading materials.

*Reflection –* Similar to drafting the paper with Dr. Anderson, this project was also very collaborative in nature. The sections of the course I was assigned were mine to complete as I saw fit. While Dr. Anderson gave us some guidance and had final approval of the project, finding the appropriate reading materials and designing assignments that would be challenging and thought provoking for doctoral students was no easy task. An additional element that had to be considered was that this course was to be taught entirely online, which can, in some cases, diminish the interaction between student and instructor. I kept this environment in mind as I drafted the various elements for my sections.

The third project in my portfolio – the development of the *Higher Education Public Relations* course -- was completed with the assistance of Dean Corley Dennison of Marshall’s School of Journalism. This course was designed for students who have a background in higher education and who are interested in how an institution communicates with the many constituencies who have a vested interest in its success. After dividing the course into sixteen sections that would explore the different aspects of the subject, I drew upon several colleagues from my work in higher education and public relations to serve as guest lecturers for the course within their respective fields. I also researched various textbooks to serve as the required reading for the course. After completing a syllabus, I sent all of the information to Dean Dennison for his review, input and approval.

*Reflection –* Having constructed and taught *JMC 330 – Fundamentals of Public Relations* online since 2006, I felt fairly confident in constructing this course. However, Dean Dennison was of great assistance in further developing the course at the graduate level. My original outline for the course was overly broad, and Dennison suggested I narrow the focus to that information that would be most relevant to the students. He also assisted me with creating the prerequisites for the course so students would have a background in public relations, and our time could be spent towards the specific subject matter.

Finally, I constructed a Communications Plan for the doctoral program. I started the process by interviewing Dean Eagle about the program and its current outreach activities and learned her expectations for my project. She informed me that Beth Wolfe, the director of Marshall’s Office of Recruitment and a fellow doctoral student, had volunteered to create a recruitment strategy for the GSEPD as part of her portfolio requirement. Dean Eagle suggested we collaborate.

Wolfe and I then conducted a listening session that included faculty and staff from the doctoral program in addition to staff from the Office of Communications. The session followed a series of PowerPoint slides that Wolfe and I had designed to keep the discussion on track and get feedback on communication strategies we had designed in advance. After we concluded the listening session, Wolfe and I drafted a summary of our efforts and presented it to Dean Eagle.

*Reflection –* Similar to the *Higher Education Public Relations* course, this portion of my portfolio gave me the opportunity to use my experience, but this time in benefitting the program. The experience was rewarding and produced both strategies and materials that will hopefully help the doctoral program raise awareness of its mission and tell its story to not only potential students, but also constituencies both on and off Marshall’s campuses. It was also rewarding to work with Wolfe and members of the Office of Communications after leaving Marshall University in 2010.

In addition to these designated portfolio projects, I also attended and participated in the student/faculty seminars that occurred twice a year. During the Fall 2009 seminar, I served as a panelist in a session entitled “What to Expect for the Doctoral Student.” Along with five other doctoral students who were in various phases within the program, we discussed the challenges and opportunities we found as we progressed through the program. It was surreal that I would be considered an experienced doctoral student, but I enjoyed the exchange and hoped our discussion was of some benefit to the other students who participated.

**CONCLUSIONS**

I entitled this portfolio paper “Morphing into a Doctoral Student” specifically to reflect how the doctoral program has changed me.

If the goal of my tract in this doctoral program is to prepare the student to be a leader in higher education, then I believe that the program succeeds in accomplishing this goal. The success of this doctoral program goes beyond career preparation by giving the student an understanding of the culture of higher education, especially in regards to its breadth and depth. By “depth,” I mean the many layers of culture that exist in an institution, from senior management to prospective students. All of these levels have their own needs and expectations, and, in some capacity, need to be recognized. As to “breadth,” I mean the sheer enormity of the culture. The many constituencies that a leader in higher education must serve often go well beyond the campus boundaries. While there will be some comparable groups from one institution to another, there will be unique aspects that will not be apparent until you view the culture from inside. A failure to understand the depth and breadth of this culture is often connected to the downfall of many academic leaders.

While the experience of working at Marshall University and what I have learned in this program are somewhat indistinguishable in this regard, they also complemented each other well. The intertwined subject matter in my employment and the program’s curriculum gave me an excellent opportunity to compare and contrast my experiences with what I was learning in my coursework. While Marshall University is not representative of all colleges and universities, it did give me a “real world” case study to consider in my coursework.

This learning while working inside the culture relates to another aspect of the program that I found insightful: There is absolutely no way that I will be prepared for every challenge that I might face as an educational leader. While I have a professional obligation to prepare myself as much as possible, I need to be prepared to find the answer when I find myself in unfamiliar territory. These answers will not always come from my coursework; however, in completing my coursework, I now have the skills and aptitude to find these answers through academic sources. As higher education itself will continue to change--whether through technology, funding sources, or even unknown factors that may not be currently identified--my ability to draw upon existing and ongoing research will better prepare me to face these unexpected challenges and improve my chances of finding the best answer.

So with an understanding of the culture of higher education and an acceptance that I can only be prepared to a certain extent to solve the problems I will face as a leader, what other insights have I learned from the program? The statement that “Higher education can be run like a business” is thought provoking to me. While few experts within the study of education would agree with the statement, there are aspects of managing a business that can be useful in managing a learning institution. What is important, though, is the understanding of where that comparison stops. The education of our students and other contributions from higher education are much different than the products in the for-profit world, as are our funding sources and benchmarks. Simply put, there is more than the bottom line at stake. In public higher education, we not only serve students, but the communities around us and, to some degree, the taxpayers who contribute a certain percentage of our resources. To try and force a learning institution into the same management model as the production of a good or service is likely doomed at the beginning, but there are aspects that do relate well between higher education and the business world.

I would be remiss not to mention the political aspects in my overall understanding of higher education. While I would consider myself an experienced political person prior to my involvement in this program, I was grossly unaware of how political higher education truly is. Relating back to the culture I explained earlier, the political nature of higher education is present at all levels and, in most cases, related to the distribution of resources. In understanding an educational term like *shared governance*, it becomes blurry as to who the ultimate decision makers are in an academic setting. Understanding these power dynamics and your relationship to them can be the difference between success and failure for the educational leader.

Horace Mann once said, “Education then, beyond all other devices of human origin, is the great equalizer of the conditions of men, the balance-wheel of the social machinery.” My last conclusion from my coursework that I would like to share in this paper connects to Mann’s quote and the importance of our work in higher education, especially in regions like Appalachia. If you believe that higher education can make life better and more fulfilling for the students who participate in it, then the importance of the work is obvious. It is a serious responsibility for everyone involved because of its connection to improving all of us in some capacity. Whether it is by opportunity or a medical advancement or simply a better understanding of the world around us, higher education can be more than a great equalizer, but also a necessary problem solver to many of the challenges that face us, especially in economically challenged regions like Appalachia. Granted, distractions occur that may keep us from realizing this transformational responsibility. We, as present and future leaders of higher education, need to not be distracted by these lesser issues and remain focused on what is important: How our institutions not only benefit the students who attend our classes, but also all of humanity.