**Duty, Pride, and Honor: the Leadership Lessons of an Army Wife**

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Education and Professional Development

Residency Portfolio

Reflective Paper

Submitted to the faculty in

Partial fulfillment of the requirements of

Doctorate of Education

in

Educational Leadership

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South Charleston, West Virginia

December 1, 2011

# When Duty Calls

Life never asks you which direction you would like to turn. Circumstances, both good and bad often dictate the path for you. This is never more true than for someone living in a military family.

As an army wife you may not put on the uniform every day, but you serve nonetheless. Your life becomes one built on duty, pride, and honor. You learn very early that despite your best efforts, you will never take first place to the military. This is not to say that your spouse does not clearly love and respect you, but your needs, wants, desires, and goals must always take a backseat to those of your soldier. And, while you struggle to balance home and family, you also find yourself wanting to pursue something just for you. You want that identity beyond being someone’s wife. You may want a career or an education or perhaps both. But to make either a reality is much more challenging when the army calls on your service not only as a support system for your soldier, but as primary caregiver to your children, and also as a volunteer to help many other military families around you.

Making your goals come to fruition is fraught with challenges, heartache, and stress. This has been the theme of my latest educational journey at Marshall University.

I came into the Leadership Studies Program with high hopes and little by way of higher education knowledge or experience. My background was in television news. However, one thing I did have was courage and it took all that I could muster to apply for the program and then jump through the subsequent hoops to be admitted.

At times the experience has been harrowing, heartbreaking, and triumphant. This is my journey.

# Service (Pride through Scholarship)

Early in the ‘doc program’, I attended one of the mandatory doctoral seminars in 2007. I recall sitting toward the back of a tightly packed classroom listening to several students I would term as ‘upperclassmen’ tell me about their experiences in the program. I remember feeling somewhat overwhelmed at the prospect of completing many classes and requirements to fulfill residency. How would I ever make that happen? I had so many responsibilities to juggle already. I was a wife, mother, and professor. However, one of the students said that everything seems to fall into place. “Don’t worry. It will all just happen for you.” I thought to myself, “Either this person is crazy or he’s had way too much coffee.” I wanted to cry.

Oddly enough, as time passed, the prediction that things just happen seemed to come true as in the case of the required scholarship elements. These include publication in a reviewed journal or co-authoring and co-presenting at a conference.

My first portfolio requirement began to evolve during my second year in the program in Dr. Simone’s CI 677 Writing for Publication course. Having a journalism background, I thought I knew everything there was to know about writing. I was wrong. I learned quickly that I would have to work hard if I was to break out of the fast-paced writing style of broadcasting with which I was familiar. Richard Gere aptly called it “journalism in a hurry” in the film Runaway Bride ([Field](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ted_Field), [Rosenberg](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tom_Rosenberg), Kroopf, & Cort, 1999). Dr. Dennis Anderson called my writing “folksy”. While my writing has improved, I still struggle to turn my more conversational style into the more formal style of writing for academia.

I remember almost literally hanging on to Dr. Simone’s every word. I poured through the text. I turned from short bursts of information written conversationally to a more prescribed writing style. I learned to research my audience while writing with a determined focus. My hours of effort paid off. I published an article entitled, Promoting Communication Skills in the Classroom in *The Education Digest*! This experience not only contributed to my portfolio, but it also helped to build my confidence and knowledge of the publishing process. It encouraged me to put pen to paper again and I published once more on my own an article entitled Building Public Speaking Skills across the Curriculum in *The International Journal of Learning*.

Ultimately I would team up with Dr. Anderson on a joint project reflecting on the challenging nature of fundraising for student organizations in the current economy. Together we attempted to publish. Two rejections followed and we were unable to find a home for this article. Perhaps, it simply was not suitable for publication either by timing or by content. However, collaborating with Dr. Anderson was an invaluable learning experience. I have learned to shape a piece to near perfection and only to find it may not be quite right for a targeted journal. I have also learned to let something rest so that I may be able to pick it back up and reshape it and try again or simply let it go.

My chair, Dr. Teresa Eagle, provided another opportunity to develop a paper and present at a conference. This was one more first for me and likely a memorable experience for her as well. Having taught speech communications, I know the value of visual aids and engaging your audience beyond the power point. So, when we presented a seminar entitled, “Building 21st Century Communications Skills in the Classroom: The Administrators Role” at the Southern Regional Council on Educational Administration conference in Charleston, West Virginia, I came ready with a power point presentation complete with balloons. The session participants had probably never seen anything like it, but I got my point across about teaching communication skills early as it builds confidence. None of the participants volunteered to try one of my impromptu topics stuffed inside colorful balloons, a favorite and fun technique of mine to assign this type of speech to students. The participants were adults who had likely spoken on many occasions, but still they were not comfortable with idea of public speaking. It was my hope that this literal example would further highlight the fear of public speaking at all ages and the great need for speaking instruction at an early age to minimize this fear.

So, the scholarly activities did come rather easily as the “upperclassmen” had promised. The other professional and academic requirements which include co-teaching a course or developing a course were more challenging. Fortunately, Dr. Eagle was there to guide me along the way.

She put me in touch with Dr. Lisa Heaton so that I could tap into her extensive knowledge of online instruction. I worked with Dr. Heaton in developing online courses for my Communications program in media writing and media management at West Virginia State University (WVSU). It was interesting to take a traditional course and re-think and reorganize it into an online version. I learned that it is not simply a matter of building a course into Blackboard. Instructors must think about what assessments will most appropriately meet the objectives and outcomes of the course as well as techniques to engage students “in the learning process” (Revere & Kovach, 2011). They must also consider the use of additional technologies and new media such as Facebook, Twitter, blogs and so forth. Initially, we began to work with an undergraduate course, Communications 307 Writing for the Media. Then, the opportunity arose to teach MS 695 Media Management for the graduate program at WVSU. I knew that it would be perfect for a Web 80 model which contains mostly online content with one to four live sessions. I launched it spring 2011. There were some rough spots. My online training using Blackboard did not fully prepare me for all the glitches with uploading quizzes and other technical problems, but I worked through it. My students were excited about the online model. I asked for feedback at our last live meeting on how the course might be improved. They suggested adding additional readings outside the required text. I knew the course needed more substance as we progressed through the semester and I have made a mental note to make the change next spring. Additional projects will include a management interview, a book review, as well as blogging and possibly the creation of a class wiki.

As for the writing course, I have been fortunate to work with a colleague at West Virginia State University, Professor Jessica Isner, who launched the online version this fall. Together, we were able to expand what I had started under Dr. Heaton’s tutelage and create an online model that has been met with a great deal of excitement from students. I believe we have developed an appropriate version of the course which will serve as a model for future online course adaptations within the Communications Department.

Lastly, I had the wonderful opportunity to work with several faculty members in the Leadership Studies Program developing a Freshman Experience course for WVSU. The notion of such a course sprang to life from conversations with my Dean, Dr. David Wohl, at West Virginia State University and from my LS 705 Curriculum Development course at Marshall University with Dr. Green. At that time, WVSU began to look into the retention problems facing the institution. Rumors of developing a new orientation course for incoming freshman began to circulate.

Thus, I approached Dr. Green about utilizing my course efforts in researching freshman orientation. He agreed and so did my partner for the project, fellow student Rebecca Calwell. We began to read and study in earnest. The project culminated in a targeted approach to WVSU’s freshman course including activities that Staley (2008) said are invaluable to freshman retention such as campus connectivity and educational direction. We envisioned a comprehensive three hour credit, full semester course tackling everything from learning styles to choosing a major. We developed a sample syllabus and at the end of the semester, I presented the course to Dean Wohl.

Initially, he shared the proposal with other administrators. Not long after, I was invited to participate in an ad-hoc committee to create a freshman orientation course for the university. There was a great deal of grumbling from the various deans, faculty involved, and administrators as no one appeared to know where to start in developing the course. Many committee members simply looked down on our recommendations but, in the end, it was our objectives and outcomes that won the day. The class was changed from three hours of credit to one. The wonderful activities we had built into the curriculum had to be severely trimmed. Nonetheless, the course was approved and I was fortunate to teach for three semesters for the College of Arts and Humanities.

I immediately realized an opportunity for a comprehensive study. If for nothing else, the study would be valuable to improve the course as it continued and was adopted into the general education curriculum required of all undergraduates at WVSU. So, I developed a simple quantitative exit survey which Dr. Cunningham guided in EDF 711 Survey Research. I was informed that since the survey was used in-house as part of a course at WVSU, it would not need IRB approval.

For three semesters, I faithfully administered those surveys and they collected dust until I enrolled in EDF 625 Qualitative Studies. I was faced with choosing a research subject for this course and I immediately went back to freshman experience. I knew from the literature that courses such as ours in many studies were seen as having a positive impact on retention (Clark & Cundiff, 2011). Retention is a hot topic in higher education as it affects revenue (Veenstra, 2009). Furthermore, from the literature, I knew the reasons why freshman dropped out including difficulty transitioning and isolation (Raymondo, 2003). What I did not know was why they stayed. This question became the focus of my qualitative study proposal under Dr. Nega Debela utilizing individual interviews in a case study (Trochim, 2008).

Unfortunately, West Virginia State University’s IRB would not accept IRB approval from Marshall to conduct interviews with WVSU students. That meant facing a dual IRB process. Dr. Debela was not intrigued at the idea and denied me the opportunity to proceed with the study. It seemed like an impenetrable roadblock had arisen. I did not think I would ever be able to continue the research. Then I enrolled in EDF 626 Advanced Qualitative Studies. Dr. Linda Spatig was overwhelmingly supportive of continuing the study which I had shaped during the previous semester. Since I was faculty at West Virginia State University I only needed IRB approval at my institution.

However, I foolishly thought I could merely dust off my original proposal and proceed from there. Indeed, this was not the case. I began to learn that the art of asking questions was so much more involved than I originally thought. My interview questions needed to be restructured. I had to tweak the IRB proposal to make it suitable for my institution removing all references to Marshall and Dr. Debela. My consent form needed work making it appropriate for WVSU as well. The study finally met with IRB approval toward the middle of April 2011.

I immediately sent out emails and letters to the students who had remained continuously enrolled from freshman to sophomore year that had participated in my first Freshman Experience course fall 2009. Only 12 of the original 18 remained. That was roughly 66%. Obviously, this was below the high end of the West Virginia four year institution average of 70.8 % (Retention Rates, 2009) and the WVSU average of roughly 60%.

Interviews were conducted using a questionnaire developed in EDF 626. Transcribing is ongoing. I will bring this study full circle weaving both the interview data and the quantitative data into an applied research project (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007) to be used to improve the Freshman Experience course at WVSU. I am not certain if the project will evolve into a paper, but I do believe I will be able to present my findings during the 2011-12 academic year as part of WVSU’s Faculty Lecture Series in an attempt to shed light on our students’ needs and the value of the freshmen experience course.

# Continuing the Mission (Connectivity)

If I could say one thing about the Leadership Program at Marshall it would have to be that for me I learned not only from textbooks and professors, but I also learned about a true connection between scholarship and practice. Early on, I chose Curriculum and Instruction as my area of emphasis. My choice stemmed from my inexperience in the classroom. I had not had the opportunity to serve as a teaching assistant while pursuing my master’s degree. What I knew of teaching came from sitting behind a desk, not standing in front of it.

Thus, I felt compelled to learn all that I could about the art of educating. I am no longer pounding the pavement for news stories, rather I am pounding information into the minds of a new generation of students and I wanted to be the best instructor I could possibly be. I sat like a sponge in my curriculum classes. I now know how to develop a course, create a syllabus, research supporting information, and fully commit to the teaching process; skills I apply in the classroom. And then, there was this notion of leadership.

Several years ago, I attended a seminar at my church on realizing spiritual gifts. This seminar revealed my gifts included leadership and teaching, which at the time appeared strange to me. I had no idea what this would mean or how reliable the information derived from the seminar would prove to be. Soon after, I entered the Leadership Studies Program half scared and reluctant to lead anything. However, I remember exactly when I found my own sense of personal courage. I no longer hid behind my husband’s rank. It was the moment I truly became my own person and the first time I began to take tentative steps toward becoming a leader in my own right. It was the night Dr. Cunningham made me cry.

Today I laugh to think how his comments that my class project was a three out of ten made me cry all the way home. However, somewhere during that 20 minute drive, I found my resolve. I realized that no one could make me feel less a leader except myself. I made up my mind that nothing Dr. Cunningham or anyone else could say to me would ever hold me back from accomplishing my dreams. I have always been a forward thinker. I knew I would not be a television reporter forever, just as I know I may not always remain in the college classroom.

# Beyond the Rank and File (Leadership Theory/Leadership Qualities)

Even now, I am living leadership. In August 2010, I took on the chair’s position in our department. The learning curve was very steep, but I relied heavily on what I had learned at Marshall and it served me well. I knew my philosophy of servant leadership (What is Servant Leadership, 2011) and I had a sense of my ethical position thanks to Dr. Nicholson. I had a strong appreciation for higher education politics from LS 760 Politics. Certainly, I have applied the skills learned in this class such as communication, listening and negotiation on many occasions when dealing with faculty within the department, administrators, and community constituents. I also have an understanding of budgets thanks to Dr. Anderson and LS 725 Finance. This helped me create budgets, and allocate funds for software, hardware, and furnishings. Additionally, I have even dabbled most recently in higher education legal matters in response to a maternity leave issue. Again, thanks to Dr. Anderson, I felt confident enough to research the issue and make my case for one of my expecting faculty members pressing for family and medical leave which was a first at our institution. Once the situation was resolved with the administration, I gave myself a proverbial pat on the back.

I am holding my own in my varied leadership responsibilities while maintaining the dual role of a department chair as both first-line administrator and faculty member (Seagren, Creswell, & Wheeler, 1993). This has certainly represented my favorite part of my learning experience. It has been a time when this woman threw off her army wife mentality and became a leader in her own right.

Still, I truly am a self-sacrificing soul (Barbuto & Wheeler, 2007). Furthermore, I understand what Barbato and Wheeler (2007) termed as the other servant leadership qualities including empathy, healing, awareness, persuasion, foresight, stewardship, growth, conceptualization, and community building.

I have been ‘tested by fire’ as the old saying goes and hopefully, have proven I am made of gold throughout my first three semesters as chair. During this time, I have dealt with inter-departmental squabbling which required my skills of listening, empathy, and healing. I have had to re-assign instructors which required awareness. I have been part of building a comprehensive curriculum overhaul for the department which certainly speaks to foresight and conceptualization. I have participated in budgetary requirements which demonstrated stewardship. I have been involved in projects with community partners exhibiting my sense of community building, persuasion, and growth.

In everything I do, I am always asking myself what is the best for all parties involved; removing my personal needs as best I can from the equation. This sense of selflessness is part and parcel of servant leadership. What I do at work is not for me per se, but for the good of our program and ultimately for the good of our students.

In many ways, this leads directly to my ethical theory based on deontology. According to Alexander and Moore (2007), my sense of ethics stems from what I presume I ought to do rather than considering who or what I am. I constantly find myself considering my options, slowly digesting or weighing out what course I should follow. I believe Immanuel Kant described this approach to action best when he said, “All our knowledge begins with the senses, proceeds then to the understanding, and ends with reason. There is nothing higher than reason,” (Immanuel Kant Quotes, n.d.). This rational behavior is action based not on instinct for instinct would suggest I always do what is best for me; rather it is based on morality and freedom of choice (Secker, 1999). According to Kant, the choices one makes are based on rationality; it is a sense of rightness we carry with us shaped by tradition, social grooming, or fear of God (Powell, 2006).

Whether it is developing fundraisers at my local armory, writing a paper for class or preparing a course schedule, I face each decision with deliberation and careful consideration. Each action has a consequence. My goal is to determine what action will encourage the most desirable outcome.

Certainly, I can thank the Leadership Studies Program for developing these qualities within me. In the last four years, I have seen a shift both personally and professionally. This shift is one from student to scholar. My sense of purpose and self-worth has been solidified. Daily, I am becoming more refined, smoother around the edges, and much more confident. Sometimes, in my mind, I think my soldier should stand and salute me!

# Never Surrender (Honor)

This journey has not been easy. Not once, but twice has my family faced deployments through the course of my studies. My husband deployed for the second time in 2007 as I was beginning the program. Once again, I had to rein in my educational goals by slowing down my course of study in order to maintain the ‘home fires’. The latest deployment involves my son’s ongoing service in Afghanistan. Each day is met with indescribable fear. The emotions are often so overwhelming that I really struggle to stay focused in my studies and my job. The weight of worry makes wearing so many hats (mother, wife, student, professor, volunteer) very heavy. Every day is a new challenge.

I do not know what the future holds, but one thing is certain, when I complete this program I will do my best to not disappoint. I have learned so much both personally and academically. I know how to ask questions. I know how to read critically and conduct research. I know how to reflect. I have a deeper understanding of learning and of how to participate in this wonderful process of educating. In addition, I am growing into my own sense of leadership and I have a better understanding of who I really am.

Martin Luther King, Jr. said, “The function of education is to teach one to think intensively and to think critically. Intelligence plus character - that is the goal of true education.” (Martin Luther King, Jr. Quotes, n.d.) These have been the lessons I have learned throughout the doctoral program at Marshall University.

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