**Portfolio Reflection Paper**

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**Introduction**

The thought of starting a Doctoral degree crossed my mind several times before I decided to submit my application. Then there came a point when I realized any advancement in my career in my field would require the degree. Finally, after months of contemplation and conversations with recent graduates of the program, family, friends, and colleagues, I applied for the program with the motivation of advancing my career. In my admission application I wrote the following statement, “Now that I have been working for several years, I want to take my education and career to the next level. I envision myself as a student affairs chief executive. Before I accomplish this goal, I need research experience, published articles and service to professional organizations. Acceptance into this program will give me the opportunity to meet my career goals, to learn and to leave a legacy. In return, I offer you my commitment to the mission of the doctoral program in Educational Leadership: to prepare practitioners to be reflective, ethical leaders who contribute to best practice in higher education.”

If I could go back in time to the beginning of this program, there is something I wish I would have known, something that I learned three years later in Dr. Spatig’s Qualitative Research course. In class, we discussed the characteristics of a qualitative researcher. The researcher must be confident, flexible, and comfortable with ambiguity and uncertainty, and not have a predetermined outcome. I have learned these characteristics are also requirements to be successful in the Doctoral program, yet I struggled with flexibility, and stressed when assignments or instructions became ambiguous to me. I now realize it is all part of the learning process, and I appreciate the fact that I was never told step-by-step what to do. I was challenged to figure things out on my own, or with the help of my classmates. In the beginning, I had a predetermined outcome of my experience in this program; I envisioned that I would become a better college administrator. This has certainly happened, but I have also transformed from college administrator to educator and researcher.

**Leadership Reflection**

I have discovered that the benefit of this program is not so much leadership in terms of content, but more about leadership as a process. The process is one that has provided me with self-discovery, as I have developed greater self-confidence and the competencies necessary to lead. On two occasions, while taking coursework, I had been asked to describe my leadership style and personal best experience. For both occasions, I described my preferred leadership style in the framework of situational leadership theory. Following my portfolio experience, I would describe my leadership style in a different way. I have learned that leadership is less about the tasks, projects, or events at hand, but more about the individual relationships and support of the people I lead. As a result of my portfolio experience, I relate more with Robert K. Greenleaf’s Servant Leadership Theory. I have learned that leadership is a process of transformation where I have been influenced and challenged by those who have lead me, and I have experienced an improved passion to help others have successful achievements and growth. I relate with Servant Leadership Theory because it emulates characteristics which I value. Specifically, “servant-leadership emphasizes increased service to others; a holistic approach to work; promoting a sense of community; and the sharing of power in decision-making” (Smith, 2005, p. 4).

I became familiar with *The Leadership Challenge* by James M. Kouzes and Barry Z. Posner’s in LS 710: Principles of Leadership and LS 705; Administrative Theory. Through the authors’ research, they determined five practices of exemplary leaders. These practices have been used by leaders to achieve extraordinary things. The five practices are (a) model the way, (b) inspire a shared vision, (c) challenge the process, (d) enable others to act, and (e) encourage the heart.

Although, I can think of several examples where I have experienced each of the five practices during my portfolio experience, the framework for my reflective paper is on the practice of *Enabling Others to Act*. In their book *The Student Leadership Challenge*, Kouzes and Posner (2008) explained that the practice of “Enabling Others to Act,” is accomplished when leaders “strengthen others” and “foster collaboration.” I feel this practice is the greatest strength of the portfolio process because it has had the greatest influence on my personal and professional development. Kouzes and Posner (2008) reminded us that large accomplishments are not achieved by a single person. It requires team work, trust, strong relationships, collaboration, and accountability, all of which I have experienced during the portfolio experience. Therefore, I asked myself, how did this doctoral program and the portfolio experience strengthen me and foster a spirit of collaboration?

**Academic Work**

I found coursework that led to the combination of learning experiences and knowledge in my field of student affairs administration to be the most empowering. For example, in LS 745, Higher Educational Law, a group of fellow students worked to present a legal case concerning campus activities fees. The subject matter was directly related to my professional position and provided me with a better understanding of a complicated issue. There have been numerous opportunities that have exposed me to a great deal of research related to my profession, and I have been able to incorporate new skills and understanding into my daily work. This increased knowledge base has transformed me into a better professional. One of the more influential course projects for me occurred in EDF 625, Qualitative Research. The semester long project included collecting, coding, and analyzing narrative data regarding the reasons women drop out of sorority recruitment. Professionally, I learned a great deal from the interview process and was able to use the information to make improvement for the Marshall University student body. I learned to treat the interviewees as experts, and it helped improve my active listening skills and ability to ask questions to obtain a greater understanding. Consequently, the incorporation of assessment in my professional responsibilities has now become a routine and common practice.

Other meaningful coursework exposed me to first-hand experiences that improved my professional development. In LS 726, Institutional Advancement in Higher Education, it was a requirement that I plan and implement an event that would engage alumni and encourage donor involvement. The assignment pushed me to collaborate with different higher education professionals and functional areas to lead and develop a committee of volunteers to implement a Fraternity/Sorority alumni reunion, in which over 100 participants were involved. In LS 714, Higher Education Administration, we used the computer simulation Virtual University, which I found to be educational, yet frustrating. The class was divided into groups with the objective to achieve specific outcomes. At times, our group decisions for the simulation were based on logic; however, there were times when we guessed and our outcomes improved. The lesson I gained from this experience was a better understanding and appreciation for the complexities involved in policy decision making.

In the early stages of the program, it was difficult to foresee all the connections between course offerings, and I wondered how or why some of the courses were related to the program or my professional development. It took a span of five years, but in retrospect I can look back and value what was happening. For example, I first began to understand the idea of synthesizing information in LS 718, History of Higher Education. Although we were studying the history of higher education, we were expected to respond to questions in a manner that put the past, present, and future of higher education together. Later, in LS 756, Current Issues in Higher Education, I began research on the *Reauthorization of the Higher Education Act*. My objective was to obtain a historical perspective of the policy and learn about the facts. When I was finished, I was quite satisfied with my knowledge regarding the policy; however, I soon learned that there are many “lenses” to consider when analyzing a policy. In EDF 630, Comparative Education, I was given the opportunity to use a global lens, which involved a study abroad component to compare the United States Higher Education Act with its counterpart policy in England and France. In LS 705, Administrative Theory, I looked at the policy through the lens of functionalism and feminism. In LS 760, Politics of Education, I considered the policy through a political lens. For me, these course connections have given me confidence in my ability to use multiple lenses for insightful analysis and effective leadership choices.

Most people enter my profession with a master’s degree in college student personnel, higher education administration, or counseling, and because of this there have been times when I have felt that not having a similar degree has been a disadvantage. For this reason, I chose my area of emphasis in counseling. Unfortunately, the student affairs counseling courses at Marshall University would eventually be discontinued; however, I was able to find other courses that have expanded my understanding of and appreciation for counseling and the fundamental function it has to Student Affairs. I have developed a passion and a deeper sense of purpose regarding my desire to help others, specifically college students. As a result of these courses, I have a better understanding of counseling theories. Professionally, I have advanced in a number of ways. My listening skills have been enhanced, and I am more confident and comfortable in dealing with stressful situations. I feel I am better equipped to recognize the signs of when a student is going through a crisis, and I know how to assist that student. I have developed a network of counseling professionals, which has opened up the door to refer students as needed. It has become easier for me to convey understanding to students without judgment. I have explored the self-awareness of my own biases and have been able to analyze these beliefs. Perhaps, the most beneficial aspect of my area of emphasis has been the exposure to counseling diverse populations, and I found it helpful and respectful to consider their cultural background and how it has influenced their life experiences.

**Hard Lessons Learned**

All experiences deserve reflection, both good and bad, and I would be remiss not to mention the fact that I have had some setbacks, made mistakes and poor choices, and lost my motivation and focus along the way. Specifically, I am referring to LS 705, Administrative Theory. Due to some unforeseen circumstances, I felt the need to make some short-cuts/cut-backs in my course work. As a result, I chose to focus on the coursework that was most challenging for me, and I ended up spending most of my time working on a journal, which required a lot of reflection. However, had I reviewed the syllabus again, I would have realized the journal had no point value, and I should have focused on other areas. Dr. Nicholson was very straight forward about her expectations and needed to be fair to all in the class. My “graded” assignments were late, and I received a C in the class. I felt totally defeated and contemplated whether or not I could or should finish the program. At that time, I should have reached out for help, but I refused. Although I have struggled with this, I realize there are times when doctoral students need assistance, motivation, or a push to get back on track.

One year later, I took LS 705 again, and as a result of redoing and rethinking the course work, I learned something valuable. Most of the time, we are expected to be able to explain our values and opinions of situations around us, but in Dr. Nicholson’s classes, I learned to challenge my own assumptions. This transformation began as a result of interaction with a fellow student who just did not “get it.” The student was closed minded and unwilling to consider the views and opinions of others. I remember thinking to myself, how and why does this student think this way, which led me to the point where I started to ask myself, “why do I think the way I do?” Today, it is common practice for me to regularly challenge my own assumptions, and I ask peers and students to do the same.

Without a doubt, peer interaction and collaboration have influenced my personal and professional growth. For example, In EDF 711 Survey Research in Education, I used a literature review from a previous course and developed a problem statement, determined relevant research questions, chose a qualitative survey method, and developed a survey instrument. Next, this project was then distributed in class for peer review. My peers provided a collection of good, bad, insightful, meaningless, picky, and opinionated feedback, but it contained information and questions I did not consider. Meanwhile, I did not truly appreciate the benefits of peer criticism to my work. As a class, I feel we were not ready to honestly critique each other’s work, but I have since realized the necessity of being open to peer review, and it is now something I welcome and appreciate. During my doctoral program journey, collaboration with peers has been a valuable learning experience. I cannot overstate the significance of peer group projects, study groups, and the general camaraderie and support in the program. In particular, the inspiration and support received from the Doctoral Seminars has been the leading motivational factor for my success and continuation in the program.

**Collaboration**

In addition to collaborative efforts with peers, I have benefited from experiences with the program faculty as well. For instance, I originally approached Dr. Anderson about possibly co-teaching LS 765, Current Issues in Higher Education.  After some consideration, he recommended that I instead co-teach LS 717, Introduction to Student Personnel Administration. We met to discuss the syllabus, learning outcomes, and what my contributions and co-teaching experience would entail.  Since the course was offered though WebCT and comprised four live meetings, it was my responsibility to go through the weekly topics to ensure their relevance, make suggestions for changes and updates, and recommend removal of outdated articles. In addition, I was charged with determining the topic of a live meeting and arranging an appropriate guest speaker and assigned the task of teaching a class session on my own with the flexibility to chose the topic. Although the idea of teaching a two-hour class session produced anxiety, the experience helped build my confidence and reinforced my sense of purpose and direction. Indeed, my goal was to facilitate a learning experience for my peers in the class, however, I learned just as much about the topic, if not more, as the students in the class that contributed to the class discussion. Above all, this experience accelerated my transition from administrator to educator.

Subsequent collaborative opportunities for personal and professional development occurred while working with Dr. Clark Egnor, as several events transpired that enhanced my portfolio experience. First, while taking EDF 630, Introduction to Comparative Education, I was required to work with Dr. Egnor and Dr. Christine Soulas, a visiting professor from Rennes 2 University in France, to make a presentation at Marshall University’s Comparative Education Symposium. The topic was “The United States, England, and France: A Comparative look at Higher Education Access and Opportunity” that followed a keynote address titled “A European Look at West Virginia Higher Education.” As this was the first time I had presented scholarly work outside of a classroom, the experience was considerably stressful. After the presentation, I participated in a travel-abroad study program to the United Kingdom and France. During the tour, I was able to visit with and personally interview several individuals involved in European education. The first-hand experience and face-to-face interaction had a deeper affect on my learning experience then the research I conducted for the presentation, and this experience inspired my interest in the educational benefits of study abroad programs. For that reason, Dr. Egnor and I developed an independent study titled Internationalizing the First-Year Experience. After becoming frustrating with the lack of relevant research, the idea of implementing intentional learning outcomes with a currently offered European spring-break tour for undergraduates was conceived. The focus of the course is to provide an understanding of leadership theories with an emphasis on examining applications of leadership principles in a global context. Through this experience, I have been able to bridge the gap between student affairs and academic affairs to create a co-curricular experience. This course, PLS 481 Global Leadership, which includes a study abroad component, will be taught spring 2013. Prior to this experience, I would not have felt a desire to pursue a partnership or envisioned the benefits, but divisions with common purposes need to partner and complement one another in higher education.

Sometimes collaborative opportunities occur through unintentional means, as I heard from a colleague that Dr. James Sottile was considering a research project regarding Fraternity/Sorority members. Since I work with these students on a daily basis, I became immediately interested. While meeting with Dr. Sottile, I learned that he planned to expand on some previous work regarding ethical behavior of students by targeting members of fraternities and sororities. The objective was to conduct the research, analyze the results, prepare a paper, and submit the paper for presentation at the Eastern Educational Research Association Conference.

 Although the survey instrument had been previously developed, we included some additional questions based on a current literature review. My responsibility was to format and upload the survey online. The invitations to participants were sent to the sample group, and the data was collected and analyzed. The paper was presented at the EERA 32nd Annual Conference in Sarasota, Florida, where Dr. Sottile presented a review of the literature and discussed the research method, and I presented the survey results. Following the presentation, the floor was open for questions, comments, and feedback. This was the part that made me feel the most anxious; however, it was not as dreadful as I had imagined. The feedback was informative and was delivered in a sincere manner. In fact, I found myself motivated and encouraged by the interaction with session participants and found it reaffirming to be around so many graduate students and faculty with a passion for advancing higher education.

**Conclusion**

On my path to becoming a better administrative leader, I have transformed into a better educator. As a consequence of this transformation, I have developed two undergraduate internship opportunities and partnered with the College of Journalism and the College of Science. Using the format of my portfolio experience, I worked with graduate students to develop and co-teach undergraduate courses on the subject of Leadership. Utilizing “*The Leadership Challenge*” as the foundation for the courses, together, we taught PSL 480 Values-Based Leadership during the fall semesters of 2011 and 2012. I believe this to be significant in my professional development because of the connection with Robert K. Greenleaf’s Servant Leadership Theory. One of the characteristics of being a servant leader is having a “commitment to the growth of people” (Smith, 2005, p. 6). This characteristic has become one of my personal core values, and I enjoy having the opportunity to nurture the personal and professional growth of students.

I initially thought the Doctoral program would be all about advancing my career, and I expected that as a result of this program, I would become a better administrator. Consequently, I now view myself as a better researcher and educator with a rejuvenated commitment to the profession of student affairs and life-long learning. I believe that student affairs professionals are educators that share responsibility for co-curricular learning with faculty, and I find myself to be a confident, true partner in academia. Furthermore, it is my intention to continue to embrace the leadership principles of collaboration and empowerment as I continue to the next stage of obtaining my degree. I expect the successful completion of my dissertation to be one of the most challenging endeavors I have ever undertaken; however, with my perseverance and motivation to stay the course, I will succeed in this endeavor.

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