

Andrews University
School of Education
Educational Leadership and Administration Department

SELF EVALUATION AND REFLECTION PAPER

Presented in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for Candidacy of the
PhD in Higher Education Administration Program

LEAD630

by

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December 2016

Where Did I Come From?

I was born in Perth Amboy, NJ- a small town primarily comprised of immigrant families. My parents migrated to the United States just four years prior to my birth from the Dominican Republic. They starting dating at a fairly young age, and coincidentally, their families decided to migrate to the U.S. within one year of each other. Although they lived in separate states, they were still within driving distance, or a train ride away. My father worked odd jobs in the Bronx, NY, while my mother stayed with her parents in Perth Amboy, NJ, also working in a factory to help her parents stay afloat financially. They were enchanted with the idea of coming to a new country, finding their way together, and aspiring to fulfill the American dream. Within the two years of their arrival, they moved in together after my mother gave birth to my older sister. I arrived less than two years after her birth, and our family was complete once my younger brother was born two and a half years after my birth. As a result of our proximity in age and being the middle child, I was close to both my brother and sister, although she was not too fond of his arrival and demand for attention. This early role allowed me to develop some of the negotiating and mediating skills that have been instrumental in my academic and professional development.

My parents' pursuit of the American dream was soon squandered by their inability to overcome financial hardships, relationship issues, and the resentment that surfaced as a result. From a very young age, I felt the absence of my father in my life. I recall moments of uncertainty, and the feeling of impotence as my siblings and I shouldered the weight of their burden in staying together for our sake. I can still easily recall pointless arguments that started off as simple questions and would later escalate to threats of abandonment and ultimatums.

Life Events

Conversion to Seventh-day Adventism

These familial issues were temporarily alleviated upon my parents' conversion to Christianity as Seventh-day Adventists; I was ten years old at the time. I felt a sense of relief and hope as my parents' newfound love in Christ blossomed. My first recollection of visiting a Seventh-day Adventist church was with one of my mother's brothers- my uncle Jose. Jose was a recovering drug addict who found healing after completing a rehabilitation program, during which time he came to know the Lord. Jose's commitment and new found life in Christ triggered a series of events that have impacted my life significantly.

Following his baptism, Jose invited me to visit the local SDA church, which became his new refuge. At the tender age of 8, I became familiar with Adventism and felt a sense of comfort in visiting the church with him periodically. Throughout the next two years, my parents never discouraged my visiting, but did not make an effort to explore Adventism on their own, until a week of prayer they attended separately brought them together in an unlikely turn of events.

During the first two years of my parents' conversion to Christianity, I was hopeful for a better family life. Those hopes were crushed as I learned my parents never addressed the root of their issues. Although they have remained together, there have been separations, countless arguments, and disagreements rooted in their past. My mother's resentment over the years only deepened as she realized her hopes for a better family life would never come to fruition.

Adventist Education

In their commitment to the church, my parents were introduced to Adventist education. I started my Christian education journey at Lake Nelson SDA School, where I completed grades 6-8. I spent three years learning about the Lord, while forming relationships that I still hold dear

to my heart today. It was in that same sixth grade classroom I met who is now my husband for the first time. I subsequently attended Garden State Academy for two years, and started dating my now husband towards the end of my sophomore year. My mother was reluctant to allow my sister and I to attend boarding school, away from her, but also wanted to afford us the opportunity to have our own bedrooms (dorm rooms) since we had been raised in a one-bedroom apartment most of my childhood. As a result, I found refuge and solace in Adventist education- it represented freedom from my reality. Despite my unstable upbringing, I always excelled as a student. I later learned this was the only aspect of my life where my efforts directly impacted the outcome of something and gave me a sense of control in what was otherwise a life of disarray.

Health Challenges

My love for education was fortified after having to leave academy due to my parents' inability to afford the cost. I attended two additional public high schools for my junior and senior years of high school. I was still an excellent student, but found myself in a system of education that was not invested in my future. Additionally, during the latter part of my junior year of high school, I was diagnosed with a debilitating physical condition- rheumatoid arthritis. It took away my ability to walk and the ability to take care of myself for several months, while doctors tried to diagnose the issue and treat it aggressively. I battled feelings of depression and hopelessness, but I did not want to relinquish my life to an illness or disability. Instead, I wanted to gain sense of control over it. As I reflect now, I often wonder how I was able to muster up the courage to battle the early stages of this medical condition, but God's gift of resiliency then proved to be a constant theme in my life.

Developing Resiliency- Continuing My Education

Needless to say, my condition became manageable and I refused to be home schooled any longer. I returned to school because I knew I had potential to excel, but had no sense of direction and nowhere to turn. I dreamt of the opportunity to be able to enroll in a Christian college with my academy friends, which later became a reality. The summer of 2006 was yet again a tumultuous time in my life. Through the Equal Opportunity Fund Program, I was given the opportunity to attend an in-state college with nearly a full tuition scholarship. However, I was unhappy. I was conflicted with the desire to pursue Christian education, but felt it would be irresponsible to forfeit my scholarship based on feeling. Considering my low socioeconomic status at the time, the thought of attending Andrews University was unfathomable.

After much thought, I consulted with my father, who has always been supportive of anything he believes will aid in the Christian journey. He suggested I take a leap of faith and apply to Andrews University, offering his support by co-signing on any loans I needed to attend. Understandably, my mother was very discontent with the idea. This also caused issues within the family unit, as my mother felt neglected in my decision to leave out of state for college. This is where being a first-generation college student became a very tangible part of my identity, as I felt the pressure of wanting to please my parent, but also wanting to pursue my goals. Without my mother's approval, and my dad's full support, I decided to apply to Andrews University to start the fall of 2006. I forfeited my scholarship for the in-state university in order to pursue my undergraduate studies at Andrews University. I had great friends, made new ones, and received educational opportunities that opened my eyes to the beauty in diversity. However, I was still uncertain of how my steps would be ordered.

College & Unexpected Loss

My first two years of college were full of great surprises, as well as the challenges associated with not having a sense of direction. I was uncertain of how my talents could be used in a career and didn't seem to have a particular inkling toward any field. As many inexperienced students might say, my goal was to find a career where I could help others. I still strived my best to excel, and did well. However, my life would change forever during the second semester of my sophomore year of college.

At the age of nineteen, I experienced the loss of my brother in a tragic car accident that took his life at the age of seventeen. That tragedy stripped the innocence of what once was a life full of expectations, hope for the future, and the drive to accomplish what my parents could not. I always wanted to live the American dream of having an education, owning a home, and being financially stable. But February 29, 2008 was the day my brother unexpectedly left this world and took a huge part of my heart with him. This event was the start of yet another dark time in my young adult life. I could not comprehend how I could move on in life with this new void, feelings of inconsolable grief, and the confusion associated with death. It hurt me deeply to experience this new level of brokenness within our family unit. My mother, who had a rather close relationship with my brother, seemed to have died with him that day. Frankly, I never thought we could be more broken than we already were. I experienced a new level of loss of control. I became very angry with the Lord, to the point I proudly denounced my faith and identified as an atheist.

Spiritual Healing

In my spiritual immaturity and grieving process, I was angry with God for a very long time. Two years after my brother's passing, I decided to challenge God and asked Him to reveal

Himself to me in such a way that I, with absolute certainty, could not deny His existence. He humored in such a way that I had to ask for His forgiveness and learn to trust Him again. Of course, this posed new challenges in my life. It meant learning to lean on Him completely and relinquish all control- one of my biggest challenges as an individual. Due to feeling the need to find ways to care for myself since childhood, relinquishing control is very difficult for me, as is asking for help. With time, I have made a conscious effort to work on this, but have also learned to accept this part of me that has contributed to my success in other areas.

Needless to say, my relationship with Christ has matured significantly, and I have learned to follow my own spiritual path. I still struggle with the traditions others try to impose on me, and the feelings of guilt associated with not following the Christian path as dictated by others' perceptions on what a "true" Christian should be. Instead, I have focused my energy in increasing my faith, and doing my best to please God. He has proven Himself to me in various ways since, and the hope I have found in my faith has been instrumental in my growth as a person; it is this same faith that led me to trust God in ordering my steps, where order did not exist.

Finding My Path

As I started honing in more on my strengths and how they would be applicable in a career path, I sought the available campus resources in assisting me with finding a sense of direction in terms of my professional career. After switching majors twice, I realized I needed to find a way to graduate college within four years, considering the financial cost of staying enrolled for an additional year. I weighed my options and chose to shift my attention to a more defined path through graduate school. Upon meeting with my Career Counselor at Andrews University, she had me complete the Career Occupational Preference System (COPS) inventory. The COPS

demonstrated my strengths as an individual and which field of study those strengths would be most helpful. She immediately began to make recommendations in terms of which types of positions and careers matched my strengths best. Among the recommendations was the business setting, as well as social services. In meeting with her, I realized I would excel in a position similar to hers. She imprinted on me, perhaps because I could identify with her as a young, educated, minority woman succeeding in her career, something I desperately wanted to accomplish.

This new mentor assisted me with researching a graduate school program that would match my skillset, strengths, and set me on a great path without having to compromise my four-year college graduation goal. With her assistance, I was able to clearly define my goals in terms of continuous education and for the first time in my academic career I felt I had a sense of direction (near the end of my college experience). Needless to say, this did not compromise what I have considered to be one of the most meaningful experiences of my life. In college, I learned to become fully independent, learned the value of life through loss, and learned an invaluable lesson- my efforts had a direct impact on how the course of my life would go with God's help. I always relied on education to escape my reality, but now it had become my reality and my ticket to a better life. I learned that having an education can afford opportunities one might never get to experience otherwise.

Graduate School

Upon completing my studies at Andrews University in May of 2010, I started my Master of Arts in Human Behavior and Organizational Psychology at Kean University in the state of New Jersey. I moved back in with my parents and older sister, after having been in college for four years. I did all I could to stay busy, and worked a full-time job and had a full-time academic

load. In my quest to move forward after having lost my brother, I immersed myself in everything I could to run away from depressing thoughts and any emotions that could interfere with my wellbeing. I did not allow myself to grieve in a healthy way. I later found this to be detrimental in my healing process, but have learned to cope in better ways. During this time, I also became engaged to who is now my husband. Having a full-time job, a full-time academic load, and planning a wedding were enough to keep me occupied for the first year of my two-year program.

After dating for seven years, my husband and I were finally married on July 10, 2011. By this time, I had completed my first year of graduate school and my new husband allowed me the opportunity to quit my job to focus on school and take care of our home. I found myself in a place I did not want to revisit. I spent a lot of time at home and at university, but felt the need to invest more time in additional goals. While working on my thesis, I decided to do an internship to assist me in my career endeavors and help me stay busy. I had the opportunity to work closely with college students as an academic coach, and assist them in creating action plans to help them succeed academically. Much like the college student I was, the students I worked with had no sense of direction and relied on me heavily to assist them with the challenges interfering with their academic success.

Through the academic coach internship, as well as my thesis topic, I was able to tap into my passion. It was during this time I realized just how much I wanted other individuals to see the value in education and help them throughout the process, the same way my Career Counselor did for me during my difficult times. I was determined to find a way to stay within higher education to help at-risk students.

Start of My Professional Development

Upon completing my Master's in May, 2012 I began my quest for employment within an institution of higher education. After three months of searching, applying to positions, and attending networking events, I was still unable to find employment. It became very frustrating and I felt desperate to take the first opportunity that became available. To that end, I began my professional career as a recruiter for a global staffing agency. I quickly learned that the business setting was not the right fit for me. Within the first year, I experienced extreme burn-out and fatigue, and was once again at a crossroads. My husband and I acquired new assets, and based our new standard of living on two incomes. It seemed like I would be stuck in this position with no way out. My health was being affected by the lack of sleep, poor diet, and emotional distress as a result of the unethical practices of the company. As a Christian, I knew I could not be part of an organization that treated their client base as poorly and deceitfully as what I was witnessing.

Once again, the Lord found ways to deliver the same message He has been sharing with me for years. I could vividly feel God asking me to take a leap of faith and trust Him. Although my relationship with Him was strengthened, He was asking me to do one of the most difficult things I struggle with- relinquishing control. He used three individuals to deliver the same message to me, and I could almost audibly hear His voice through them. The request was one I could not ignore. In what was one of the hardest, and most risky, decisions I've had to make in my young professional career, I submitted a four-week resignation letter to my employer. I did not have another position lined up, and I did not know how we would revert to a one-income household. In the midst of the uncertainty, however, I felt encouraged by knowing I was leaning on God.

Within two weeks of submitting my resignation letter, I received a call to interview for a Career Counselor position at a college. This had been my prayer since working with my Career Counselor at Andrews University. It seemed surreal, but I knew the journey God was taking me on. I knew there was something better in store, and the Lord blessed me with the opportunity to become employed two weeks after having submitted my resignation letter to my previous employer. It was, yet again, another life-changing experience as I clearly saw the hand of God ordering my steps. The career counselor position allowed me to work closely with at-risk students in assisting them with internships and job opportunities. I was impressed with how specific my prayer had been, and just how timely God's response was. I felt undeserving.

While serving students in the career counselor role, I was able to focus my passion for students even more. From the onset of my graduate studies, I became captivated by the idea of exploring post-secondary degree attainment behavior of at-risk students and how this affects college retention and degree attainment. The leaders I was privileged to work with knew where my passion was and pointed me in the right direction. After two years as a Career Counselor, I was given the opportunity to work as a full-time Academic Mentor, working directly with at-risk students and assisting them with successfully completing their college degrees, in spite of their challenges. More recently, and in conjunction with my role as an Academic mentor, I was asked to chair a Retention Committee, consisting of a representative from each department at my campus. The purpose of this committee is to implement effective strategies to increase student retention and engagement.

Who am I Now? (My Commitment to Higher Education)

Through my personal experience, as well as work experience, I can confidently say I have discovered my passion- the power of education in the development of individuals. My work

experience has opened my eyes to a world of opportunities, and influenced my decision to pursue a doctoral degree in administration. Although I have thoroughly enjoyed my experience thus far, I have discovered the limitations of my aspirations without the necessary experience and education. I have learned that in order to have an engaged audience and gain the trust of individuals that can effect change, I need the education and experience necessary to have a voice. To that end, I am blessed to have been led to the Higher Education Administration program at Andrews University.

Self-Evaluation

Upon completing the requirements of LEAD 630, I have undergone weeks of self-reflection and self-evaluation. I have been able to analyze what drives my thought process, my learning style, my strengths, and how these factors influence my interactions with others. With the assistance of the Gregorc Style Delineator, Kolb Learning Styles, and StrengthFinder assessments, I have confirmed some things I was aware of as well as discovered other aspects of myself

The StrengthFinder results demonstrated my top five strengths as being (1) focus, (2) input, (3) futuristic, (4) relator, and (5) learner. My focus theme allows me to prioritize, follow instructions, and take action. It is recommended that I show compassion by acknowledging others, as well as their contributions to my effectiveness. I excel when I have measurable, specific goals and this drives my effectiveness. Consistent with what I have been aware of, I work best when I can control my workflow. According to this theme, I also do not thrive in changing situations. This theme is consistent with my upbringing and need to remain in control of my situation at all times.

My input theme describes my need to know more and constant journey in acquiring knowledge. I tend to be thorough in my research, and take pride in being able to share my analysis, observations, and findings. I also consider myself resourceful, but this can trump relationship

building if I am not careful. Consistent with this theme, I consider knowledge the foundation for my stability (Rath & Conchie, 2008, p. 192). One challenge is that my need for input can stagnate my output. The recommendation for this theme is that I share information with those who can benefit from it, and engage in conversation with others. This is consistent with the learner theme, in which the individual is intrigued by the process of learning rather than the outcome. I can agree with the first part of this theme as it applies to me, however, I am very much results-driven. I become quite obsessive with the outcome, but the theme only accurately depicts my zest to learn.

Additionally, my futuristic theme allows me to stay optimistic about the future and be inspired by possibilities. I found this theme to be consistent with my way of thinking up to this point. The remaining theme of relator was the one I feel I least identify with from the five strengths yielded. Although I enjoy close relationships with others, I often shy away from these in a work setting to avoid misunderstandings and mixing personal relationships with professionalism. Contrary to the recommendations for this theme, I do not expect to keep these relationships long term, nor do I enjoy achieving goals with friends. Close relationships in a work setting intimidate me.

The Kolb Learning Style Inventory revealed I have a converging style of learning. This learning style involves active experimentation and concrete experience. I found this theme to be mildly inconsistent with my strengths, however. This learning style focuses on abstract ideas and concepts, as well as experimenting with new ideas and practical information to find solutions. I found my learning style to be more consistent with the assimilating style, which consists of reflective observation and abstract conceptualization. Individuals with the assimilating learning style consider logical, sound theory to be more important than practical value. Consistent with my preferences and input/learning themes demonstrated by the StrengthFinder, the assimilating style

prefers lectures, readings, and exploring analytical models as well as processing (Rath & Conchie, 2008, p. 9).

Lastly, the Gregorc Style Delineator seemed to be the most accurate depicter of my dominant characteristics. It demonstrated my strengths lie in Concrete Sequential, as well as Abstract Sequential. The combination of these mind styles depicts me as someone who is instinctive, methodical, analytical, and correlative. I can also be described as an individual who is orderly and controlled, resulting in having little tolerance for clutter, mixed signals, loss of security, and being disregarded. My negative characteristics and areas in need of improvement include being in control, domineering, and a reality avoider to some extent. Again, these mind styles, although not all flattering, are consistent with my background and upbringing. It has been a life-altering experience to be able to undergo this process of self-reflection and understand the connection and patterns throughout my childhood, adulthood, career, and hopes for the future.

Where am I going?

Mission Statement and Vision for the Future

I commit to my professional growth and development in the field of higher education in order to contribute to the success of at-risk students as they aim to achieve their academic goals. I will continue to hone in on my strengths and become a leader that not only focuses on these strengths but considers my limitations as a necessary part of the journey. I will keep my zest for learning by surrounding myself with opportunities to not only gain knowledge, but also share that knowledge and allow others to benefit from it as well. As indicated in my personal statement, I aim to further investigate the causes of the disparities in higher education, while examining influencing factors of student persistence and retention. Upon completion of the Ph.D. in Higher Education Administration program, I aim to conduct extensive research that informs policy-

makers and institutions of higher education on solutions that will provide equity to all students seeking to pursue a post-secondary degree.

References

Rath, T., & Conchie, B. (2008). *Strengths based leadership: Great leaders, teams, and why people follow*. New York, NY: Gallup Press.