

ePortfolio Executive Summary

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The PhD Experience

I have always been passionate about education and learning, but I never imagined that I would enter a PhD program, let alone be at the point of reflecting on my experiences while on the verge of becoming a PhD candidate starting the dissertation process. I have been extremely fortunate throughout my life to have a phenomenal support system of family, friends, educators, and classmates but I have also been in a position of privilege that allowed me to focus on my education instead of worrying about where I would sleep at night, how I would access the necessary technology to complete assignments, and whether I had reliable transportation to make it to campus. Moving into an administrative position at an institution where most students come from first generation, Pell-eligible, or underserved populations highlighted the necessity to improve student accessibility and equity, remove barriers from support systems, and build a community encouraging policies that are student-centered. Finding a career in academia has only solidified my love for education since I can continue learning while also encouraging the next generation of students to fully take advantage of their college experience. Because of this, I decided to continue my educational journey and pursue a PhD in Leadership and Policy with the overall intention of influencing change in higher education.

The two main factors that led me to the PhD program at Niagara University specifically were the flexibility of class offerings and the multidisciplinary nature of the program. I am already working in my field and being able to further my education without having to place my career on hold was encouraging. It has also been wonderful to share classes with individuals from a wide variety of backgrounds, each working toward a goal uniquely their own while following a parallel path. Learning not only from my instructors but also my classmates has been such a rewarding experience so far, and seeing previous cohorts work through the hardships

while maintaining careers, families, and positive attitudes is inspirational. There are innumerable ways in which my coursework has prepared me for my dissertation research, but the research courses will be the most directly applicable for this next stage in my PhD. Having a background in literature and rhetoric has made me comfortable reading and analyzing texts, writing essays, and navigating scholarly databases. However, developing, planning, and implementing an entire research study was completely new to me. Having multiple courses break down the variety of approaches to research, as well as the practical and ethical considerations of each method, has encouraged a new level of critical thinking that I will continue to rely on as I move forward with my dissertation research, tentatively entitled *Predicting Student Success: Tracking Persistence Rates in Higher Education Using GPA, Academic Status, and Class Attendance to Determine Early Intervention Needs of Students*.

While I am still unsure of who will be formally involved in my dissertation committee or how my research results will come together, I know that I have invaluable resources in everyone who is in my cohort and in my community. The knowledge I have gained throughout my coursework has prepared me to be an ethical and considerate researcher, a critical and concise writer, and a leader and policy maker with a visionary mindset focused on improving, assessing, and streamlining procedures. Not only have I had to balance the demands of multiple doctoral level courses each semester, but I have remained dedicated to my institution and navigated both institutional restructuring and a promotion. The work that I will be completing for my dissertation will be directly connected to further promoting academic equity and retention policies for the students who need it most. I am prepared and motivated to embark on the next stage in my PhD journey and contribute to the overall discussion surrounding higher education policies and procedures.

Supporting Examples

Throughout the Leadership and Policy PhD program, there have been a variety of classes, assignments, readings, and technologies that have challenged my thinking and expanded my worldview. Although I intentionally designed projects and chose research topics related to higher education, the way I evaluated the topics has become more strategic and critical. Courses within the leadership and policy core taught me the importance of understanding and positively influencing organizational culture, continuously assessing progress, and implementing best practices. The research core encouraged data driven decision making using quantitative, qualitative, and mixed-method research approaches while utilizing a variety of data analysis software like SPSS and GIS. The PhD program has shown me the importance of a visionary mindset; the value of understanding organizational theory; the significance of diversity, equity, and inclusion policies in context; and the necessity of utilizing new technologies.

Visionary Mindset

A visionary mindset is a necessity for any individual in a leadership position, particularly if that individual hopes to encourage growth and development within an organization. Throughout the PhD program, assignments often required a discussion of recommendations, areas of improvement, or long-term goals. This encouraged the development of a visionary mindset with a commitment to implementing valuable, purpose-driven practices. Within Dr. Leone's ADS720: Process, Politics, and Evaluation of Public and Social Policy course in Spring 2022, I completed a project evaluating the Pell Grant program using welfare capitalism, policy learning, and punctuated equilibrium to explain the evolution of the higher education policy. Not only did I have to examine how the policy was formed, but I also needed to look forward to see how the policy can continue to evolve, how these decisions are being developed, and what I can

do to ensure that stakeholders have all the information they need to adjust the policy in a way that will positively impact as many individuals as possible. Although this is just one example, continuing to develop a visionary mindset when making decisions and determining policies will improve not only my upcoming dissertation research, but also my role as a leader and policy maker within an organization. This visionary mindset and the work completed for ADS720 connect to both Standard One and Standard Three by focusing on beneficial future changes and encouraging stakeholder buy in.

Organizational Theory

One assignment that I am particularly proud of is my final research paper for ADS710: Organizational Theory, Development, and Strategic Change with Dr. Veres completed in my initial semester of the PhD program. This was my first major assignment in the program as well as my first introduction to organizational theory and assessment. Although I have extensive experience writing papers, I knew that doctoral level courses would have very different expectations. Dr. Veres was a fantastic resource throughout the process, and despite being new to APA formatting, PhD coursework, and organizational theory, I believe my final paper instilled valuable knowledge that I continue to utilize for my coursework now and will continue to use throughout the dissertation process.

In order to become a more effective leader, it is necessary to understand how organizational culture is embedded into every aspect of an organization, including the physical and digital spaces, the hierarchy of leadership, and the decision-making process. Learning about organizational theory, as well as the symbolic, modern, and post-modern perspectives, provided a strong base for future coursework related to organizational theory, including ADS730: Organizational Assessment and Accountability. Since starting the PhD program, I have shifted

into a leadership role as the Director of Student Success. Completing an assignment specifically focused on the impact of organizational culture and physical space within higher education institutions gave me a deeper understanding of how to approach interacting with senior leadership as a new director, how to advocate for my employees and for necessary changes, as well as how to best allocate time and resources within an organization. This is consistent with Standard Two and Standard Four as organizations are complex and an understanding of organizational culture and assessment are necessary for success.

Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion

Diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) was included as a vital component throughout every course in the program, ensuring that all individuals are tasked with improving their organizations in a manner that is ethical and beneficial for all stakeholders. Standard Two and Standard Five directly mention that program completers must advocate for, model, and sustain diversity, equity, and inclusion practices. By making these beliefs a main tenant of the program and ensuring that all coursework takes these into consideration, integrity and fairness are at the forefront of research and decision making. When tasked with developing a mixed-methods research proposal for Dr. Marwaha's ADS805: Research and Statistics, I focused on DEI initiatives in higher education that can directly improve policy, access, and accountability for underrepresented populations. My main interest in pursuing a PhD has always been to examine the barriers in higher education institutions that prevent individuals from being successful. Learning how to structure my research and analysis throughout my coursework has prepared me to further pursue this line of inquiry in my dissertation.

New Technologies

Throughout the PhD program, I have been tasked with learning a variety of new programs and technologies including Zoom for class participation and presentations, SPSS for statistical analysis, GIS for geographic mapping, and Wix for building an ePortfolio. Each of these technologies brought new challenges, but also new resources for research and development. Standard Seven is entirely focused on the use of current technologies and this program certainly expanded my knowledge of what is available and how it can be utilized. Despite having no exposure to statistical analysis before entering the program, going through ADS805: Research and Statistics and ADS820: Advanced Quantitative Research and using SPSS in both courses encouraged me to pursue quantitative research for my dissertation. Because of those courses, my research will focus on developing a data-driven prediction model for student success.

In addition to SPSS and other research software, the process of creating an ePortfolio to reflect on my initial semester in ADS810: Research Seminar and then updating that ePortfolio in ADS840: Doctoral Seminar to reflect on my experiences completing my coursework has been extremely rewarding. It is easy to get lost in the daily expectations of a course and lose sight of how each requirement works together. Being able to spend time reflecting on each course while making connections to the overall experience of pursuing a PhD through the ePortfolio process not only develops a professional, interactive resume but also places each assignment, course, and standard in context.

What Comes Next?

There are many aspects of the PhD program, both tangible and intangible, that I will utilize throughout the dissertation process. Most significant is the critical thinking and analytical

skills that I have been developing while working through my coursework. Although I already had experience navigating scholarly databases from my previous educational experiences, developing a project based on research I am gathering is a new experience and would not be possible without the skills I learned in the research core courses. Additionally, the leadership and policy core courses taught me to craft research questions that are focused on accountability, assessment, and ethical policy development. I will continue to utilize the knowledge I have gained in my coursework throughout my dissertation journey and as a leader within my organization.

With the support of my supervisor and institution, I am happy to examine this area of academic success using student data from Villa Maria College related to these key constructs. Ideally, results from this study will be applicable to other higher education institutions and student success, persistence rates, and early intervention needs can all be improved to benefit all involved stakeholders. Within higher education institutions, understanding the relationship between academic performance, attendance, and persistence rates is vital for the success of the organization. This can be examined broadly by looking at overall persistence, retention, and graduation rates, or the analysis can be performed to determine the viability of programs. Knowing where specific programs fall within the overall persistence rates of the institution ensure that informed decisions are being made as far as allocating support and resources, or even whether programs or majors should be discontinued. Cumulative GPA, academic status, and attendance rates can be predictors of overall academic success and persistence while simultaneously serving as indicators of a need for early intervention or institutional support services.

Artifacts and Standards

Essays, projects, presentations, and additional coursework along with descriptions of materials and standards can be found on my ePortfolio website at alissakowalski.com. See below for a brief outline of standards and the supporting evidence.

Standard	ePortfolio Evidence	Connections
<i>Standard One:</i> Promote a visionary mindset, and continuously develop, advocate for, and enact a mission, and core values that are shared and supported by organizational stakeholders.	ADS710 Organizational Theory Research Paper ADS720 Public Policy Analysis ADS730 SAP Policy Brief and Presentation ADS750 Diversity Audit Group Presentation	Standard One is supported by artifacts including an organizational theory analysis, a public policy analysis, and a DEI audit, all related to a visionary inclusive mindset for improving organizations and organizational culture for all stakeholders.
<i>Standard Two:</i> Advocate for, nurture, and sustain a creative and caring culture consistent with the mission of the organization and embracing of equity, diversity, and inclusion.	ADS710 Organizational Theory Research Paper ADS740 Friedman Presentation ADS750 Diversity Audit Group Paper and Presentation ADS750 Diversity Survey Group Paper	Standard Two is supported by artifacts including an organizational theory analysis, a DEI audit, and a book presentation, all related to advocating for and sustaining a positive, inclusive organizational culture.
<i>Standard Three:</i> Cooperatively, comprehensively, and effectively manage the people, resources, and ideas	ADS710 Organizational Theory Research Paper ADS720 Public Policy Analysis ADS730 SAP Policy Brief and Presentation	Standard Three is supported by artifacts including an organizational theory analysis, multiple policy analyses, and a research

of their organizational context, while embracing flexibility and adaptability.	ADS820 Quantitative Research Project	project, all related to managing people, resources, and ideas within an organization.
<i>Standard Four:</i> Assess organizational quality and make decisions to positively impact the organization informed by sound data analysis and evidence following accepted research methods and practices.	ADS710 Organizational Theory Research Paper ADS720 Public Policy Analysis ADS805 Mixed-Methods Research Proposal ADS807 GIS Analysis Project ADS830 Qualitative Research Project	Standard Four is supported by artifacts including an organizational theory analysis, a public policy analysis, and multiple research projects, all related to making data-driven and evidence based decisions for the benefit of organization stakeholders.
<i>Standard Five:</i> Model integrity, fairness, equity, and ethical purpose while also personifying optimism, perseverance, self-efficacy, and composure.	ADS730 SAP Policy Brief ADS740 Kouzes & Posner Presentation ADS807 GIS Analysis Project ADS820 Quantitative Research Project ADS830 Qualitative Research Project	Standard Five is supported by artifacts including a policy analysis, a book presentation, and multiple research projects, all related to making equitable and ethical decisions.
<i>Standard Six:</i> Appreciate, respond to, and influence the larger political, social, economic, legal, and cultural contexts through their research, analysis, and evaluation of procedures and policies and empower	ADS720 Public Policy Analysis ADS730 SAP Policy Brief ADS770 Leadership & Economics ADS820 Quantitative Research Project ADS830 Qualitative Research Project	Standard Six is supported by artifacts including multiple policy analyses, an essay on leadership and economic theories, and research projects, all related to influencing and evaluating policies within a variety of contexts.

<p>others to join in the process with them.</p>		
<p><i>Standard Seven:</i> Use current technologies to improve and enrich their practice and the work of the organization.</p>	<p>ADS805 Mixed-Methods Research Proposal ADS807 GIS Analysis Project ADS820 Quantitative Research Project ADS830 Qualitative Research Project ADS810 & ADS840 ePortfolio</p>	<p>Standard Seven is supported by artifacts including multiple research projects and the ePortfolio, all related to utilizing current technologies to improve organizational culture and policy.</p>