**Masters Project Reflection**

Student

Professor

Institutional Affiliation

Course

**Date**

**Masters Project Reflection**

**Introduction**

This reflection paper aims to reflect on my academic, professional, and personal growth during this master's program at William & Mary in Higher Education Administration. In this program, I have undertaken rigorous coursework and had exciting opportunities for experiential learning through my graduate assistantship in Student Accountability and Restorative Practices (formerly Community Values and Restorative Practices) and a meaningful experience with the Student Transitions Engagement Programs (STEP) internship. Through these experiences, I have gained a holistic understanding of student development, leadership, and policy implementation at a university, especially about student affairs work. Moreover, I have also played the role of an international student, which has challenges that sharpened my adaptability and advocacy skills.

**Before Graduate School**

Before graduate school, I taught as a Mathematics and Science teacher with the Ghana Education Service, where I developed an affinity for educational equity and student development. Teaching in Ghana revealed stark resource and systemic barriers that challenge student success generally and more acutely for students from low-income backgrounds. With this in mind, I stepped up by taking leadership steps, such as my initiative Operation Support Girls Sanitary Pad, which donated menstrual hygiene packets for female students facing financial constraints.

I was therefore motivated to enroll in a master's in science education in chemistry at the University of Cape Coast. However, while pursuing the program, I realized that my true passion was in higher education policy and administration, where I could work to affect institutional reforms and student affairs to enhance access to education for underrepresented groups. I deferred my studies at the University of Cape Coast to use this amazing opportunity to study Higher Education Administration at William & Mary. I transitioned and developed more in-depth knowledge of student development, leadership, and equity in critical higher education areas, moving toward my long-term interest in Higher Education policy and policy-making in Ghana and internationally (Jogie, 2021).

**Coursework and Key Learning Experiences**

**Student Development Theory Learning Experiences**

The exploration of student development theories throughout the master’s program has greatly contributed to my understanding of how students grow and prosper in higher education. The courses I took were Student Development in College: Theory, Research and Practice which provided a comprehensive introduction to foundational theories such as Chickering’s Theory of Identity Development, Schlossberg’s Transition Theory, and Baxter Magolda’s Theory of Self Authorship. With these theories, I have been able to assess critically students' approaches to their academic, social, and personal journeys, especially as it pertains to diverse and underrepresented populations. For instance, knowledge of Schlossberg’s Transition Theory has enabled me to improve the support I offer students during their transition to college, particularly in the work I did for the Student Transitions Engagement Programs (STEP). Also, using Chickering’s vectors of development assisted with reflecting on my graduate assistantship at Student Accountability and Restorative Practices (SARP), which allowed me to use a developmental lens when handling student conduct cases instead of a punitive approach. With student development over decades of practice, the value of theory to guide practice has been cemented for these who would be successful in the practice of student affairs as it innately must encourage a holistic approach to reaching the goal of a developed person.

Introduction to Student Affairs

A cornerstone to my graduate education was the Introduction to Student Affairs course which gave me a foundational knowledge of the history, philosophy and functional areas of student affairs. The essence of this course was to identify student affairs as a vital part of student success, retention and engagement. By studying through cases and discussions, I learned about the challenges and opportunities in different student affairs departments such as academic advising, residential life, and career services. A big takeaway was to emphasize the collaboration that happens between departments to ensure a well oiled support system for the students. Particularly, this knowledge was important for my STEP internship, in which I focused on crossdepartmental activities such as the Services, Opportunities, and Supports (SOS) Fair. I have adopted an approach to working with international students and other marginalized population based on advocacy and equity as advocated for in the course. For the most part, this course helped me to solidify my commitment to student affairs and has given me the means to be an active contributor to the field.

**Assessment and Evaluation**

The Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education course gave me a well-rounded understanding of what assessment can be used to further student learning, program development, and institutional effectiveness. In order to gain a deeper understanding of the significance of data-driven decision-making within higher education practices, I discussed direct vs. indirect assessment, accreditation, and equity-minded evaluation (Suskie, 2018; Yan & Carless, 2022). One of the key learnings was looping the loop in assessment and using the data collected to maintain meaning changes over and above for compliance only (Garcia & Mayorga, 2017). For my final project, I assessed and improved undergraduate students' critical thinking skills through qualitative and quantitative methods to evaluate learning outcomes. However, this experience reinstated the importance of iterative assessment, which is driven by equity and aligned to institutional goals to support student success (Carter & Hurtado, 2007).

Applying these principles to my SARP and STEP roles, I used assessment strategies to trend student conduct behavior, measure the effectiveness of the effort of restorative justice interventions, and evaluate student participation in transition programs. Combining these experiences contributed to developing my ability to design and analyze assessments in new settings beyond the traditional classroom realm, most notably in student affairs and leadership development. The course has prepared me to use assessment-driven decision-making in future research and leadership positions so that students' experiences are always improved through data­informed policies and equity-minded assessment practices (Henning et al., 2022).

**Social Justice Praxis**

The Social Justice Praxis in Higher Education course forced me to examine systemic inequities, power structures, and institutional diversity commitments. For the semester, I have learned more in-depth about embracing critical theory, socialization, racism, classism, ableism, and activism, by which historical and institutional forces mold educational access and student success (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2017). What we went over in this course was the study of performative diversity efforts, which are equity-focused language that institutions adopt but do not coincide with substantive policy change (Jogie, 2021). This theme was central to my Institutional Diversity Analytical Paper, where I critically analyzed the University of North Carolina's diversity statement by focusing on the fact that institutional commitment to equity is often vague and has no measurable outcomes. Furthermore, talking about race, colorism, and anti-Blackness pointed to how systemic policy interventions to change higher education are needed beyond symbolic gestures and as interventions that dismantle oppressive structures.

In my class projects, I co-led my group's presentation on classism, in which we discussed how socioeconomic status affects college access, retention, and student experience. Through this project, I was able to delve into the area of race and class, but more specifically, how more obstacles on the road to success block students from low-income backgrounds. Individually, I presented how racism in higher education plays out structurally through admissions policies, crafting selectivity, and a bias in the curriculum. Specifically, I looked at how microaggressions, systemic policies of a discriminatory nature, and practices of exclusion that have marked parts of the past continue to disadvantage students of color (Solórzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000). I applied to these projects as I maintained my dedication to championing the policy changes that create equitable learning environments. Looking ahead, I will incorporate the social justice frameworks into my leadership philosophy to engage diversity, equity, and inclusion as more than active jargon but as points of action in the administration of higher education.

**Leadership and change**

The Learning course on the mark of my Leadership and Change in Higher Education was very important to my understanding of leadership dynamics within institutional contexts. In the course, I was challenged to evaluate leadership as a dynamic and adaptive process with no definitive answer or set of rules. In the section above, therefore, we have explored organizational change theory, leadership identity, and the position of leadership in enhancing institutional transformation (Bolman & Deal, 2021). From engaging in discourse on adaptive leadership, relational leadership, and the social change model, I appreciated that leaders in higher education (Bridges, 2016) move in and out of the complexities of leadership. As Bolman and Deal (2021) discussed reframing leadership, I found a strong connection in how leaders are expected to look at challenges through multiple perspectives to upscale change.

A second learning experience that I discovered through this course was that my leadership learning intervention project dealt with improving ethical decision-making within the Undergraduate Honor Council (Yalley, 2024). Using this project, I could apply leadership theories to real-life situations by incorporating transformational and adaptive leadership principles to meet student conduct leaders' challenges. Moreover, the project raised the significance of context in informing student accountability decisions and good communication in this process. I also could reflect on a socially just leadership education, which made me realize that leadership and equity are intersectional and that inclusive leadership practices are needed (Guthrie et al., 2013). Ultimately, that degree equipped me with some strategies for designing leadership interventions that are responsive to the needs of institutions while creating an ethical and inclusive leadership culture.

**Educational research and practice**

The Educational Research and Practice course was vital in developing my research skills, knowledge of methods, and critical ability about scholarly sources. For the semester, we learned various quantitative and qualitative research methodologies and how they could be used in educational environments. The single most valuable component of this course, however, was the opportunity to learn how to design a research study from the ground up: how to develop research questions that might be appropriate for study from a theoretical perspective, ways to select methodologies that suit the research problem, and how to analyze data once data are collected. Assignment on article critique review strengthened my ability to critically evaluate research with my ability to determine the strengths and limitations in a study design, statistical methods, and generalizability of findings. Moreover, the literature review on mixed methods research also showed that combining qualitative and quantitative methods provides a better interpretation of complicated educational problems.

Data collection, analysis, and interpretation experience was gained with quantitative and qualitative data projects as part of the course assignment. In my quantitative project, I analyzed student completion rates, loan default rates, and cost of attendance at four-year colleges using SPSS and understood how institutional policies affect student outcomes. In my qualitative research work, I conducted interviews on the role of AI in higher education. It helped me analyze thematic patterns and ethical considerations of technological role in learning environments. The dual projects confirmed the importance of conducting and reporting ethical research and issues such as validity, bias, and responsible reporting. Many of the skills this course has given me will help me contribute to furthering educational policy discussions and institutional decision-making in my future career and academia.

**Graduate Assistantship at Student Accountability and Restorative Practices (SARP)**

Prior to working with Student Accountability and Restorative Practices (SARP), I was very familiar with the traditional punitive approaches to student conduct violations and discipline in Ghana, which emphasize punishment over rehabilitation. However, my experience as a Conduct Case Administrator and Co-Advisor for the Honor Council completely turned that perspective over its boot. In dealing with students' academic dishonesty and policy violation cases, I gained knowledge of the context of student discipline, which agrees with the restorative justice framework introduced in class. Rather than punitive, I highlighted education, reflection, and behavior change, considering that student conduct processes would be developmental, not strictly disciplinary (Abes, 2016). In addition to that, I also worked closely with student leaders on the Undergraduate Honor Council. I identified a gap in how they consider contextual factors in conduct cases that were related to what I did in my leadership learning intervention project. This project aimed to train student leaders in restorative practices and ethical decision-making, preparing them to handle conduct cases holistically and educationally.

In particular, the biggest challenge in this role was navigating authority as a graduate student while mentoring undergraduate leaders. In this instance, however, this experience pushed me to adopt some transformational and servant leadership principles, going for support, guidance, and empowerment over positional authority with the support of my supervisor. Being able to adjudicate cases at SARP over the years changed how I approach student conduct and strengthened my ability to create ethical leadership and decision-making among student leaders. While playing this role, I developed my mentorship, leadership, and conflict resolution skills, thus reasserting my passion for student advocacy and promoting ethical leadership as a requisite in higher education.

**Internship at the Office of Student Transition Engagement Programs (STEP)**

When I interned with STEP in Summer 2024, I was integral in planning programs and initiatives to support new and returning students transitioning to William & Mary. During my year, I was heavily involved with organizing logistics for all kinds of programs and activities for My First W&M Weekend, which was one of my main responsibilities. The campus resources and engagement strategies I pursued with this role allowed me to understand better how working together and creating effective events contribute to gauging student success. I also worked on a major initiative with the Services, Opportunities, and Supports (SOS) Fair. In collaboration with my supervisor, I developed this program from scratch to bring together the campus offices to provide students with essential resources. However, I could not see the final implementation as my internship concluded, but being the lead in providing the initial planning and coordination proved to be an incredible experience working in cross-department teamwork. I also helped develop the Student Resource Guide to aggregate important student support services campus-wide into one centralized and easily accessed format. Additionally, I managed logistics and recruited volunteers for Welcome Event Preparation as part of Volunteer Coordination to ensure students felt welcomed and supported during their first days on campus.

Working for STEP was a very fulfilling experience, as I had a chance to participate in student transition and engagement initiatives. Witnessing the change firsthand showed how our work impacted new students' sense of belonging and reemphasized my love for student affairs and higher education administration. I also perceived this event to reinforce my longing to work with student support services to continue building spaces of inclusiveness and welcoming students from all walks of life. During a team trip to Busch Gardens, my STEP memory was the first time I experienced a roller coaster. It was an experience I would never repeat, both exciting and terrifying, but in the end, nowhere near as bad as I predicted. By offering up this internship, not only was this an opportunity for valuable professional experience on my end but also an opportunity to connect with students and staff whom I plan to help along the way to help navigate academic and social journeys in higher education.

**Conference & Professional Development Engagement**

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Participating in Association for Student Conduct Administration (ASCA) training and attending the Virginia Student Services Conference (VSSC) expanded my professional network and enhanced my knowledge of new trends in student conduct, student advising, and conflict mediation. I also attended two breakout sessions: one about academic advising and mentoring, which reemphasized the need to build relationships when supporting students, and the other about conflict mediation, in which I learned important lessons in engaging in mediation strategies to resolve student disputes. Through these sessions, I developed the capability to work with students holistically to have advising and mediation practices by developmental and equity-based principles in student affairs. Here, I use the skills I gained from these sessions as a Conduct Case Administrator at SARP to use restorative conflict resolution strategies to promote ethical decision-making and student growth.

Membership in ASCA was a significant milestone as my office sponsored my membership and opened up many ongoing opportunities for professional development. As a part of ASCA, I engaged in webinars on pivotal topics to be aware of or in practice, such as Trauma Informed Practices, Alternative Resolutions, Primary and secondary Sanctions, Educational Measures, and Bias in Student Conduct. These sessions expanded my mental view on the accountability frameworks for students. They assigned meaning to the need for context-sensitive and developmental approaches to student conduct resolutions. These experiences have cemented my dedication to ongoing learning and professional networking, giving me the skills needed to confront such complex student affairs issues and secure more rehabilitative and student-focused disciplinary rates in higher education.

**Personal Development & Identity as an International Student**

I found the Higher Education Administration program to be transformative in its own right, especially in terms of how leadership, student development, and institutional support structures are understood. Being an international student from Ghana, this program opened my eyes to various perspectives, cultures, and other minor things that affect student experiences in education beyond (only the United States). The transitions from academic, social, and cultural aspects to professional life have been challenging and enlightening, emphasizing the need for inclusive educational policies and student support initiatives (Shukla et al., 2022). Through interacting with faculty, friends, and professional development opportunities, I have been able to reflect critically as an international student on international students’ experience of higher education in the U.S. — especially related to the access to resources, career development, and perceiving campus life (Tavares, 2021).

Having realized the need to bring an international lens to such conversations about student support equity, I contributed my experiences to the class discussions and shared them. I shared insights into the academic, social, and professional barriers that international students face. My advocacy spanned beyond the classroom for the student's sake in student affairs, whereby I advocated for strengthening institutional support mechanisms for international students. I have advocated for equitable and restorative approaches to student discipline by serving as a Conduct Case Administrator and Co~Advisor for the Undergraduate Honor Council. I have direct experience with how institutional policies affect students in diverse communities (Abes, 2016). Moreover, I mentored student leaders and was part of the initiatives related to orientation and transition programs at STEP, which helped me develop a strong desire to help build spaces where all students feel worthy and supported.

I have learned to refine my leadership and advocacy skills during my years of these experiences to serve as strong leverage toward championing initiatives that address the needs of diverse student populations. In this regard, I have become more intentional in promoting policies and practices that would benefit international students, especially career development, academic success, and cultural adjustment (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2017). As I look to the future, my goals are promoting policy and making programs that enhance equity, access, and belonging for international students in higher education so that they have the resources and opportunities to be successful academically and in the workplace.

**Future Aspirations and Commitment to Higher Education**

Recapitulating my experiences, I plan a bright future in higher education, leadership, policy, and student advocacy. I am privileged to have gone through graduate school, as it has affirmed my passion for advocating for equitable policies and creating student engagement and inclusive school environments. The vision this has created for impact-driven leadership has solidified my lessons in leadership, student development, and institutional accountability. In the immediate future, my main goal is to transition into a Ph.D. program in Educational Policy and Leadership, where I will continue to enhance my knowledge and abilities in research on higher education, policy analysis, and leadership education. I plan to further my academic publishing and conference presentation activities to contribute to ongoing discussions about student affairs, equity, and international student success.

In addition, I am passionate about further developing my ability in student engagement and institutional change by embracing cross-departmental work and using data-informed decision-making to facilitate inclusive, rich learning experiences for students. To help successfully guide student success initiatives that build diversity, I aim to strengthen relationships of faculty, administrators, and policymakers to contribute meaningfully to strengthening relationships of faculty, administrators, and policies. I will continue to enhance my leadership skills through opportunities afforded by professional development, policy research, and strategic program assessment. I will continue to make my work responsive to the changing needs of higher education institutions and inclusive of diverse student populations.

Eventually, in the long run, I desire to assume roles that will act between research, policy, and practice and contribute to educational policies and institutional reforms in Ghana and the U.S. through scholarship, mentorship, and leadership. I aspire to work as a professor in higher education for teaching, mentoring, and research while endorsing policies for ensuring access and equity to underrepresented student populations. I also intend to create a school in Ghana aimed at student success, leadership development, and equal learning. The Higher Education program has allowed me to possess knowledge and skills to serve students effectively and opened my view as a leader and advocate. With the event behind me, I am dedicated to advocating for policies and programs that equip students, create opportunities for change, and nurture systems where students can thrive in diverse environments.

**Conclusion**

The Higher Education Administration program has given me a strong foundation in leadership, policy, and student affairs and enhanced my knowledge of equity and institutional change. Through this journey, my dedication and passion for building inclusive educational settings is growing stronger: Students of various backgrounds should be supported, empowered, and valued, no matter who they are. The academic coursework, professional experiences, and interaction with fellow faculty, peers, and administrators have helped me acquire the necessary skills to contribute to student success initiatives and higher education leadership. I want to express my utmost appreciation to the William & Mary community, the faculty, and staff who have helped guide and educate me, and my peers whose varied perspectives enabled my development.

I look forward to inspiring change, advancing equitable policies, and being a leader with integrity and purpose within higher education as I progress through the next phase of my academic and professional career.

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