

SYNTHESIS ESSAY: PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER

By Tracy Liu

When I reflect on my journey throughout my program since I started in Summer 2018, it has been one that has seen me through the highs and lows of my professional career. Overall however was an undeniable sensation of excitement in seeing how my outlooks were being actively changed for the better as each class gave me more context and tools.

My original reasons for getting my Master's, however, were not so inspiring.

I remembered that I thought this program was going to primarily help me grow my personal college admissions consulting business at the time I decided to apply. I figured for my future clients to take me seriously as well as find ways to become more versed about the education system I needed to get a master's to demonstrate my commitment to being an educator. I also thought getting my masters in the realm of education would result in me becoming more effective at guiding my clients through the admissions process. While there were many programs that were contenders, I ended up only applying to this program because of its flexibility to choose my own curriculum. I was cognizant at the time that I didn't know whether or not my business would be successful since I had just started out. Therefore, this program would still keep my options open since I already had an administrative position working at my university.

Not even a few months after starting my third class in the program was when I decided to close up shop on my business. Faced with only my job at the time, it forced me to critically reflect and realize that I was very dissatisfied in my previous role for reasons that weren't about the actual work. In fact, I eventually came to terms that I was actually working in a very toxic environment that was hindering my potential.

What happened next in August 2019 was one of the hardest things for me to do and I will have to take a slight tangent to explain my thought process at the time.

I get into personal philosophical debates thinking about these two similar sayings often: "***do what you love***" versus "***love what you do***." My interpretation of the former is that not everybody always ends up in situations where they get to "do what you love." In fact, this anecdote is rather loaded and something told to us when we were young: just go and do what we want to do! Yet how do we reconcile the fact that you don't know what is out there? So how would one know what they really want to do if they don't know it doesn't exist yet?

I now turn to the latter quote: love what you do. I didn't love what I was doing and so I left for my current role in the Economics Department in August 2019. Now the only problem was at the time I started, I really only knew about 15-20% of my job card and the first few months were

incredibly rough leading me to question multiple times whether I was really cut out for the position.

However, what inspired me to stay was becoming more intimate with my faculty and the type of work they were doing. This was in sharp contrast to my last position which had me far removed from the academic work going on. While I am far from being any sort of real economist, it is obvious that the problems my economic professors are trying to address through their research and projects they spearhead are so impactful. For example, one of my faculty co-founded **GiveDirectly**, a platform that allows you to donate and send money directly to people living in poverty. Another faculty member looks at how the pandemic has **impacted gender groups differently** (i.e. we are definitely in a “shesession” and women have higher unemployment rates). Most recently, another was **selected to serve in the Biden-Harris administration** as a Senior Economist.

It made the upward battle of learning my job and how to navigate the beast of university bureaucracy worth it and it simultaneously became my “ah-ha” moment on how I wanted to dedicate the rest of my working life. I had finally articulated my version of “love what you do.” My sociology undergraduate degree helped me understand that humans are socialized to gain all the necessary skills to become contributing members of society. Now how we each “find” that niche that works for our individual situations is completely up to us.

When I found a space where I was being nurtured by colleagues that cared about me and also at the epicenter of exciting innovation and life altering work; I found my connection to feel like my work mattered. I came to appreciate the culture of collegiality that is so unique to academic departments. I saw that my one degree of connection to these intelligent academics and educators breathes life into my decision to become an administrator. I thought back to my time as an undergraduate at UC San Diego and how certain professors really encouraged me to stay curious about the world and constantly keep a sense of wonder. Working at a renowned research university to me felt akin to working at other similar innovative spaces like technology or energy. When I distill down what our school's purpose was, I realized that we were in an institution responsible for educating and bringing out the future generation of pioneers and trailblazers. I still feel a deep sense of pride working for my alma mater and proudly saying that I never left college.

In knowing my “why” for working at the university, the three courses in my program that I enjoyed the most were centered around helping me better understand complex topics related to my system. They were also very timely topics as the COVID-19 global pandemic was unfolding and evolving.

EAD 876 Budgeting and Finance in Higher Education (Spring 2020): This class was occurring during the start of the pandemic. It was fascinating to observe and analyze how my university reacted with certain cost-saving measures and strategic resource allocation decisions in real time as I was learning about the theories and topics. I was able to consider the impact these decisions had socially on not only myself but on other related units and departments. This course really puts into perspective the difficulty that comes from leadership in making financial calls when it comes to competing resources. I am now able to draw the connections of how a complex university such as mine goes through a central resource allocation process. Each year my department submits budgets and a variety of factors impact our asking power such as student enrollments, debt we've collected, etc.

These financial and budgeting principles also helped me cope initially in adjusting to our new pandemic reality through giving me an alternative understanding of why certain cost saving decisions were made by our campus.

EAD 867 Case Studies in Educational Leadership (Summer 2020). I really enjoyed my case studies course not only for gaining the valuable practice in analyzing a case study, but also the rich conversations that ensued with my classmates and Professor Nathan Clason. In the very literal sense, I got to methodically consider a real life situation that I may very well potentially face. I learned that different leadership philosophies would be better suited for specific scenarios and it would take practice and keen observation to catch the nuances of what best tools to carry out. Interestingly, for a moment I had considered during this time whether to pursue a PhD in leadership studies because I was so moved by this class. However after engaging with some of my faculty in administrative leadership roles to get their perspectives, I ultimately decided to stay on my original path to focus on the operational side of academic affairs. This is in large part due to another valuable perspective I got from this course on the idea of the "everyday leader" such that with Meyerson (2002) and also described poignantly in Drew Dudley's TED Talk.

The overall message is that "leadership" isn't merely a title, it is a culmination of actions that can be found and carried out by anybody from wherever they operate. This fundamentally shifted my actions because I became mindful that I could be very influential from exactly where I am now. I didn't necessarily need to have a formal title in order to gain partnerships and favorable business outcomes. During this time, many of my colleagues at other academic departments within my division and also outside of my division were struggling with staffing instability. As a result, I re-centered my energies to focus on doing good work and volunteering on helping others to provide support. I found that by making myself available and freely giving valuable resources lead to my work ethic becoming recognized beyond my immediate contacts and have opened up more opportunities than I could have imagined. In this respect, I was carrying out my skills as an "everyday leader" thanks to this class.

EAD 805 Administration in Higher Education (Spring 2021): This course was particularly powerful because I was given so many tools that I immediately integrated into my day-to-day life. I learned about the various frames (structural, political, human resource, symbolic) one can use to comprehend administrative decisions being made in a complex organization such as my university (as well as how they differ in different organization types). Furthermore, so much of this course was dedicated to putting theory into action; we considered different scenarios and scripts I would see in my job and considered their efficacy through the various frames. Simply said, this class opened up a whole new way of understanding how my future actions will be carried out. It has become second nature to comprehend the different ways that my actions may be interpreted from perspectives across the organization. I now have new perspectives I could use to digest colleague's actions, words, meanings as a way to connect more effectively.

While I am highlighting only these three courses, I can definitively say that I found value in each and every class I took in this program. Beyond the functional information I learned from each subject, it is nearly impossible to overstate the invaluable gift I received of self inquiry. There is this quote by Osho where he said that "the world is nothing but your own magnified mind." Each class honed this muscle of me constantly critically reflecting within myself where and how my understandings and lived realities completely shaped how I showed up in the world. So while I had made a "switch" somewhat in my program due to a change in my career, everything I learned along the way brought me to where I needed to be.

I want to conclude with the maybe not so obvious statement that being an "administrator" is also a rather broad statement. To this day I still find myself discovering all the different types of administration that exist within a university. This also translates to many opportunities to try on new roles. There will always exist a need for effective leaders that possess the aptitude and perseverance to manage the intricacies of a university academic organization. As I soon finish up writing this chapter of my time taking this Master's program, I recognize the limitless stories I will continue to create. There is nothing more powerful than knowing oneself and seeing all the potential one can offer.

I choose a life of working in education administration in order to foster effective academic enrichment. This is my "why" I do what I do. As a result, I can now always go forward confidently articulating that I "love what I do" - no matter the type of role that I take on.