

Executive Summary: ADS810 and the First Semester as Cohort XI

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### **Leadership and Policy**

I was not sure what to expect going into the first semester of the PhD in Leadership and Policy at Niagara University. I knew that it would be a shift in how I had approached school in the past for a variety of reasons. The biggest modification was that I was moving away from an English language and literature focus, which includes using MLA style and citations. Writing analytically about literature, authors, rhetoric, and critical theory is second nature at this point. This first semester in the PhD program has introduced me to an entirely new style of writing and analyzing – I am accustomed to using 10 sources for a 30-page paper but now I need to do the exact opposite. I have been using MLA for so many years that it is difficult for me to shift to APA, particularly when I am concurrently teaching MLA to students. Additionally, I am working a full-time job, teaching a class, and still working at my bookstore once a week. While I was tutoring, teaching, and working at the bookstore during my MA program, there are very different demands on my time now. Last but certainly not least, a PhD program has vastly different expectations from my previous education endeavors and it will take some time to learn this new routine. All things considered, I am enjoying my time in the program thus far, and my experiences working with my cohort and hearing from the guest speakers has been an inspiring start to my PhD journey.

### **Retrospection**

Over the course of the semester, there have been a variety of projects and assignments, both independent and as a group. These assignments included reflections on guest speakers, reviewing dissertations from the previous program graduates, chapter presentations with classmates, and the creation of a digital portfolio. All of these assignments have provided insight into the Leadership and Policy PhD at Niagara University, encouraged me to think about how I

want to focus my research, and provided me with an opportunity to collaborate with my cohort members.

### **Personal Digital Portfolio**

I created my personal digital portfolio through the free website, WordPress. I have used WordPress in the past and, while I do not have extensive experience navigating the coding and design side of the website, there are innumerable resources available to help me create something presentable. I chose a website over something static like PowerPoint or Prezi because I wanted to be able to update it throughout my PhD journey and I used this assignment as an opportunity to set up the behind the scenes work. On my homepage, I have embedded links to a personal introductory page, the courses divided by standard, the courses divided by name, and eventually, an executive summary of my entire time at Niagara University.

While the only fully idealized page on my digital portfolio right now is my introduction, this was a valuable experience as it allowed me to conceptualize how the courses work together to create a cohesive PhD experience. Part of the comprehensive exam is being able to talk through what has been accomplished in various courses and how the assignments align with certain standards. By setting up a framework now, I can simply update the website at the end of each semester to make sure everything is in place when the time comes for the comprehensive exam. I will not have to worry about crafting a new presentation or completely restructuring a previous iteration, but will already have an interactive, professional website that will assist me in answering any questions.

### **Primary and Secondary Group Presentations**

There were two group presentations in ADS810, one for Creswell and Creswell's (2018) *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches* and the second for

Rallis and Rossman's (2012) *The Research Journey: Introduction to Inquiry*. While the chapters I was assigned were rather similar and had overlapping concepts, my groups were polar opposites – but not in a bad way. Both of my groups worked together effectively, and I believe we developed high quality, engaging presentations that showcased not only the material, but our strengths as well.

### ***Creswell (5 & 6)***

For the primary group presentation, Michelle, Sharon, and I were assigned “Chapter 5: The Introduction” and “Chapter 6: The Purpose Statement” from Creswell (2018). We met once to divide the work, create a PowerPoint outline, and plan our presentation. We decided that Michelle would create a review game based on Who Wants to be a Millionaire, I would cover Chapter 5, and Sharon would cover Chapter 6 in our allotted 30 minutes. We created our PowerPoint shell and shared it so we could all edit it together on our own time which worked out best for our busy schedules. Michelle, Sharon, and I worked together well, and our presentation was balanced between interactive material and a thorough review of the content, including introductions, abstracts, and purpose statements.

### ***Rallis and Rossman (4 & 5)***

The secondary group presentation for Rallis and Rossman (2012) consisted of Kristy, Danielle, Omar, and I. My secondary group met before my primary group, and then met a second time closer to the date of our presentation. We covered “Chapter 4: Being an Ethical Inquirer” and “Chapter 5: Constructing Conceptual Frameworks.” Omar and Kristy divided Chapter 4 between them, and Danielle and I covered Chapter 5. During our first meeting, we determined that we should have an interactive segment for each chapter since this presentation was required to cover an hour of the class. We set up the PowerPoint shell and planned to check back in closer

to the date of our presentation. When we met again, Omar had found a case study to provide an example of ethics connecting to our chapter. When we discussed it, we realized that we could use this case to connect both of our chapters and decided to incorporate it throughout of our interactive discussions, including our breakout rooms. Similar to the primary group, Kristy, Danielle, Omar, and I worked together to create a thorough presentation discussing ethics, IRBs, and conceptual frameworks.

### **Personal Reflections from Guest Speakers**

Over the course of the semester, six different guest speakers joined our class on Friday night to discuss their experiences in the PhD program, share their dissertation journeys, explain their unique areas of expertise, and pass along any advice they have for our cohort as we start the Leadership and Policy program. This highlighted the interdisciplinary nature of the program that grabbed my interest in the first place, so I was happy to meet such a diverse group of successful and passionate people in this way. After each guest speaker, we were tasked with reflecting on what they shared with the class in a discussion board response.

#### ***Dr. Rossi – 10/1/21***

I found Dr. Rossi's presentation extremely helpful, particularly when she gave the class a quick overview of the APA key features and discussed her own experiences writing her dissertation. While plagiarism is obviously important, that was more of a refresher for me as I discuss plagiarism and academic integrity with my English Composition classes each semester.

Coming from an English background, I have not had much exposure to APA style citations. I feel very comfortable using MLA and have used it so often that I very rarely need to look anything up to format a paper or works cited page. Learning some of the more specific aspects of APA in relation to our future projects was great, as it made me less concerned about

needing to look through the manual for things like hyphenating words or heading divisions. I am very glad she provided page numbers for the key APA aspects as well, as I purchased the manual without the page divisions (although I may invest in one in the future!).

Dr. Rossi's research was intimidating, to say the least. However, hearing about both her difficulties and then extreme successes made me far less nervous to start working on my dissertation. I do not have much experience using and manipulating data sets, particularly the massive data sets that Dr. Rossi utilized in her research. I am interested in exploring the various websites she provided to see how much information I can gather about my research topic even before developing my own set of research questions or surveys. I am intrigued by setting up a dissertation as three articles. I like the idea of having three articles drafted for journal submission by the time my dissertation is completed. Obviously, revisions will be necessary as they were for Dr. Rossi, but it is still a step in the right direction.

Overall, I really enjoyed hearing from Dr. Rossi and seeing how her research developed from her initial research objectives to her published articles!

***Dr. Ward – 10/15/21***

I really enjoyed Dr. Ward's presentation. I found her presentation style engaging, and I loved the way she required participation in a very low-pressure style. I also admire the work she is doing as a social worker exploring solutions for social justice programs.

Dr. Ward's three recommendations for the PhD journey were helpful, as I do sometimes go back and forth trying to figure out what I'm doing here! Her first recommendation was asking yourself what you want the PhD program to do for you. Next, she said to make sure that you're treating the PhD as the pathway to the goal rather than the goal itself. Finally, she suggested we

all develop expertise that we can use to set ourselves apart and distinguish ourselves within our fields.

Dr. Ward next focused on her main lecture topics: research questions and paradigms. The discussion on paradigms connected well to what we have worked on in Dr. Veres's course, as we looked at modern, symbolic, and post-modern perspectives when we had our first class. I feel like it was easier to understand when Dr. Ward presented it as it felt more like a conversation, which was easier to digest than the Organizational Theory textbook (for me, at least). I appreciated that Dr. Ward said that you do not need to have just one perspective when completing your research. Dr. Ward's discussion of the research questions, including the research question checklist, was also helpful.

Dr. Ward's presentation was very informative, and made me feel more prepared to start utilizing research questions and paradigms to start my own literature reviews and research papers.

***Dr. Smith – 10/22/21***

Dr. Smith is clearly very knowledgeable about education, sustainability, and international relations. His goal to develop an international PhD program is fascinating, and I believe that it sounds like a great way to make studying abroad more applicable and affordable for a completely new population. The idea of being able to study in a variety of countries within a unified program would be extremely appealing to me if I was in a slightly different place in my life. I love the idea of global collaboration, and I do think this could be a valuable new model of graduate education. I do wish that Dr. Smith had spoken about worldwide sustainability more in his presentation, as I am interested in sustainability and how it can be utilized in the field of education moving forward.



While I do not know how much Dr. Smith's presentation will influence my own research or time in the PhD program, I am looking forward to the opportunity to review conference papers.

***Dr. Mastrole – 10/29/21***

Dr. Mastrole is a pediatric nurse practitioner and the Senior Director of Patient Management and Utilization Review at Kaleida Health. Either of these jobs would be stressful on their own, and yet Dr. Mastrole was able to manage being a working nurse AND completing her PhD. She offered our class great advice on how to organize research and sources, what she wished she had done differently in her time as a student, and her important takeaways from the program as a whole.

Dr. Mastrole spent the first part of her presentation discussing the importance of having a manageable and accessible organization for your research throughout the program. She utilized a research matrix to keep track of everything she studied across her coursework and it was extremely beneficial, particularly when it came time for her to take the comprehensive exam. Keeping track of materials has been one of my biggest concerns with the PhD program and I can only imagine it will be even more complicated when I begin working on my dissertation. I have been using NoodleTools, but I'm not entirely happy with the program so I would like to find a better way to keep track of everything that I've been reading, what courses or assignments it is connected to, and my overall perceptions of the content.

Dr. Mastrole mentioned that she regrets not publishing more while she was in the program. Publishing is something I find very intimidating, but I would like to work on submitting materials. I think having a solid research foundation would help me get over some of

my apprehension because I'll know I have the sources readily available if I need to make any corrections or adjustments.

One of the interesting aspects of research that Dr. Mastrole mentioned was making sure to highlight yourself as the researcher and be open about why the topic is important to both the field and you as an individual. You should pay special attention to the implications for you as a leader as well as potential policy change. Answer the questions “why is it important?” and “what is it contributing?” to show the importance of the research. I also found Dr. Mastrole's discussion of GIS and SPSS useful as it helped situate the theoretical usage of these data analysis programs within a real dissertation research project.

I enjoyed Dr. Mastrole's presentation and appreciate how she incorporated her career, interests, and community into her dissertation.

***Dr. Hodges – 11/5/21***

Dr. Hodges is a professor of clinical mental health with 25 years of therapy and volunteer experience. The work he is doing is extremely important, and he is clearly passionate about helping individuals in need. His volunteer work with orphanages working on suicide prevention and trauma would be demanding on its own, but he does this work while also balancing other commitments. Because of this, Dr. Hodges felt like the perfect presenter to visit our class this week and discuss stress, burnout, and self-care.

Something I really appreciated about Dr. Hodges' talk was when he said that he's not an expert in mental health, but that's he's knowledgeable and well-trained. I think it's important to focus on the importance of always learning and not being comfortable in our current level of understanding on a topic. I think most of us would be comfortable calling Dr. Hodges a mental health expert based on his education, experience, and overall expansive knowledge of the field.

Hearing him admit that he is still always learning made me feel better about sometimes feeling behind in my area of “expertise.”

Dr. Hodges explained the five key dimensions of self-care: physical, psychological, spiritual, social, and occupational. I think we can all relate to having a variety of stressors from all different dimensions, particularly since our cohort has people from diverse backgrounds who are balancing school, work, family, friends, and hobbies, all in the midst of an ongoing global pandemic. Taking a moment to practice deep, relaxing breathing and consider daily gratitudes was a nice break from course assignments, midterm meetings, and all the other obligations that could lead to compassion fatigue and burnout.

Compassion fatigue and burnout can be detrimental to everyone involved, particularly the individual who is trying to manage everything and help everyone. Dr. Hodges presentation was timely and informative, and I appreciated his open and friendly presentation style that encouraged self-reflection practices.

***Dr. Ola – 11/19/21***

Dr. Ola presented about her ambitious and important dissertation topic and research process as she examined infant mortality rates in Nigeria and the gaps in healthcare policy. I truly appreciate her willingness to share her passion and her difficulties with her topic, as it was something that hits close to home for her (and many others). She shared that she is originally from Nigeria and that it has one of the highest infant mortality rates. She wanted to know more about the reasons, the research, and the potential areas in which her study could influence vital change to the healthcare system in Nigeria. Because of her personal stake in this research, she did mention that it was extremely difficult to bracket herself as a researcher. I can imagine this

was particularly difficult as she was spending time within the community performing interviews and getting to know women who were living through these impossible situations.

Dr. Ola chose to do qualitative research for her dissertation for a number of reasons. For her, she explained that “the participants are not statistics.” It was important for her to collect the interviews in person, in the local language, and transcribe them herself. She wanted to ensure that the data was accurate and represented the stories of these women. She discussed cleaning the research to make sure she narrowed down her material to what was directly connected to her research. It was interesting to see her method for navigating data analysis and organization since her approach was vastly different from previous speakers, as well as what we are covering in Research and Statistics. Dr. Ola also explained that the data readily available to her was not accurate because of the practices and beliefs of many communities in Nigeria. This added to her motivation for interviewing those who have experienced infant loss, as she explained that Nigerians are superstitious about death and unlikely to be dishonest in their responses.

Dr. Ola was able to utilize her knowledge of Nigeria and combine it with her experience as a researcher to create a study that was significant both for her and for communities experiencing high infant mortality rates. I have immense respect for Dr. Ola and her undertaking, and I believe her work is representative of taking advantage of the opportunity presented to us in the dissertation process to think about how our interests can align with helping others.

### **Dissertation Analysis of Program Alumni**

Writing a dissertation is a daunting task to say the least. Exploring the various dissertations of the students who came before our cohort was a valuable learning experience, as it showcased the vast array of subjects, research studies, writing styles, and approaches that all led to successful defenses and PhD completions. Some of the dissertations I chose were based on

personal experiences or interactions with the author (Fr. Ayaga and Dr. Rossi), while others were selected based on the topics or research methodology. In reading through the dissertations, I feel as if I have a better grasp on how I would like to approach my own dissertation in the future, as well as a slightly more optimistic outlook on the process.

***Fr. Ayaga (2015)***

Although Father Ayaga's dissertation is not connected to my research interests, I wanted to read it because I know him from his time spent working at Villa Maria College a few years ago. Since Father Ayaga decided to do a mixed-methods study, his dissertation is six chapters instead of the traditional five chapters. Everything is extremely organized within his table of contents, and the use of headings and subheadings makes it easy to navigate to different sections of the dissertation. He also included tables and figures within the dissertation rather than putting them all in an appendix, but by including a list of where they are all located right at the end of the dissertation, it allows the reader to easily reference back to their location and the corresponding discussion.

One of the sections I found interesting was the "Background of the Researcher" within the first chapter. Since I chose this dissertation specifically because I knew the author, I also was aware of his deeply personal connection to the topic (although I am sure most individuals writing dissertations have a deeply personal connection to their chosen area of research). I was curious if Father Ayaga would address his background, and I found the manner in which he discussed his experiences within his dissertation topic to be very open and appropriate for the situation, and it showcases his investment in his research. Additionally, it was clear in the research discussion in the latter portion of his dissertation that he was able to maintain his separate roles as a researcher and as a priest.

The literature review was easy to follow, and I found the subsections extremely helpful navigating the multifaceted concepts that work within Father Ayaga's discussion of the Catholic Church, Ghana, and the historical partnerships. I am considering a mixed-methods study for my own research, so I enjoyed seeing how it was set up within this dissertation. Father Ayaga had four research questions guiding his research, all of which connect back to his statement of purpose. I am still working on my comfort level and comprehension with regards to statistical analysis, so although I found those discussions more difficult to follow, that is probably a limitation with the reader rather than the author.

***Dr. Condino-Snopkowski (2020)***

Dr. Condino-Snopkowski's dissertation follows the standard five-chapter structure and utilizes a mixed-methods research design consisting of a survey and a follow up interview. Her research examines the perception of special education teachers, supervisors, and principles on special education laws within the Orleans-Niagara Public School Districts. I appreciated the clear table of contents with subheadings directing the reader to focused sections within each chapter. Although Dr. Condino-Snopkowski has a section listing the appendices, figures, and tables, only the appendices are located at the end of the dissertations. I was expecting the figures and tables to be placed within the appendices as well, but they were placed within the dissertation body paragraphs, even when spanning more than a page. I thought was something that was discouraged, so I was surprised to see while reading.

Dr. Condino-Snopkowski's introduction does a great job situation her research within the current historical context surrounding the education equality and special education. Combined with the literature review, readers get a substantial overview of special education and can move forward through the dissertation with the necessary knowledge to comprehend how the study

will add to the current understanding of the field. Dr. Condino-Snopkowski dedicates a portion of the methodology to her personal relationship to the topic. She acknowledges that, as someone with 21 years as a special education teacher, she has a close and personal connection to special education policy and implementation. I respect her ability to bracket herself as she collected, analyzed, and presented the results of her research.

The research results and the summary of findings sections of Dr. Condino-Snopkowski's dissertation synthesize the details from the quantitative survey results and the qualitative interview questionnaire. Even though she only examined a handful of individuals from a fairly small selection of schools, there is a lot for her to sift through and present in her dissertation. She is able to clearly present the relevant information, although at times it feels like she is listing the responses more than analyzing. Even so, Dr. Condino-Snopkowski connects her literature and her study together throughout her conclusion when discussing the implications and recommendations for future studies.

***Dr. Roberto (2021)***

Dr. Roberto researched leadership strategies that can encourage student success in schools defined as underperforming or located in lower socioeconomic areas. Like other dissertations, it is written in a five-chapter format with an introduction, literature review, methodology, data analysis, and implications. Dr. Roberto set up her research with a focused framing question and a list of five follow up questions to guide her dissertation. I like the idea of having one major research question with more specific questions branching out to divide a larger concept into more manageable subtopics.

Similar to Dr. Condino-Snopkowski, Dr. Roberto utilized an initial questionnaire apparatus for her research and followed up with interviews. Dr. Roberto's questionnaire is more

qualitative in nature, and combined with the interviews, her overall study takes a more personal approach to the dissertation rather than a statistics-focused quantitative study. It works well with her research questions, and I believe Dr. Roberto was able to gain valuable insight into educators in underperforming schools and present implementation recommendations based on her research and analysis.

One aspect of Dr. Roberto's dissertation that I particularly appreciated was how straightforward she was when presenting her research questions, survey and interview results, and eventual recommendations for the schools. Dr. Roberto made extensive use of subheadings, bullet points, and numbered lists to present important details in a clear and succinct manner. One of my concerns for my own dissertation journey is either not being able to write enough or, conversely, not being able to *stop* writing and making my dissertation too difficult to manage. Dr. Roberto's inclusion of bulleted key details and ordered lists was done really well, particularly ending with ten key implementation recommendations, and gave me something to think about when I get to the writing phase of my dissertation.

***Dr. Rossi (2014)***

Dr. Rossi presented to our class about her three-article dissertation related to high school equivalency exams and college attendance plans which made me want to read her dissertation for this assignment. I found her presentation engaging for multiple reasons. First, many of the students I advise are non-traditional students who are facing a variety of barriers, some of which Dr. Rossi discussed. Second, the idea of breaking up a dissertation into three articles that can then be submitted for publication sounds like a great way to make all of the research and writing required for a dissertation work beyond simply submitting it as part of the degree requirement.



Other presenters mentioned the importance of publishing, so this style of dissertation would hopefully alleviate some of the grunt work for submitting papers.

I like how Dr. Rossi presents the table of contents in a very straightforward, direct manner. She includes each article title as the chapter of the titles, adds an introduction and conclusion, and ends with references and appendices. Since this dissertation has a different structure than the five-chapter dissertations, it makes sense that the table of contents would not have as many subheadings. This might pose a challenge for an individual searching for a specific area of discussion within the chapters, but since Dr. Rossi went into the writing process knowing she wanted to submit each chapter to a journal separately, I imagine there would be a table of contents written for each during the revision process.

Each of Dr. Rossi's chapters are easy to navigate and the research findings are clear. The introduction and conclusion work well to unite the three studies, and I appreciate the inclusion of introductions, conclusions, limitations, and implications *within* each article as well. Dr. Rossi's dissertation is a great example of scaffolding the knowledge within each chapter to lead to greater, more overarching implications as a whole.

***Dr. Yuan (2021)***

I was particularly interested to read Dr. Yuan's dissertation as I currently work as an academic advisor and am always looking for ways to connect with my students and build rapport. I appreciated the wide range of variables – cultural empathy, rapport, belonging, English proficiency – that Dr. Yuan examined in her dissertation as they are all important contributing factors to successful relationship building in advising and academics.

Although it is slightly difficult to tell from the table of contents, Dr. Yuan's dissertation also follows the five-chapter format. Her table of contents spans two and a half pages and while I

respect her specific and detailed headings and subheadings, it does visually blend together when trying to scan through the list. That being said, if I was searching for a certain aspect of her dissertation rather than looking at it in its entirety to reflect upon, I would know exactly which chapter and page to find it.

Dr. Yuan's research methodology was really interesting for me as I do not have much experience with different modeling theories or strategies. I found the models really useful in understanding how Dr. Yuan viewed the variables as interrelated and how the survey questions fit within this model. I imagine a live discussion of these models or a dissertation defense would be even more compelling, but I appreciated the visual representation of her analysis. Dr. Yuan's IRB process discussion in chapter three and the survey permission requests located in the appendices were also really helpful for grounding that process in a tangible example.

### **Research Interests**

My research interests are still evolving, and I imagine my dissertation focus will shift multiple times before narrow down my topic. Currently, I want to research and influence the policies that directly affect students. I want to promote institutional change that facilitate student success beyond letter grades. Students should know that they have the support of their institution, and that the policies are in place to better their experiences, not hold them back. I want to study and promote policy that encourages and improves student accessibility and equity, remove barriers, and help build a community. I want the students I work with to have the same opportunities for exploration and education as I had throughout my college career. Learning is valuable, but it is also difficult for many reasons, but there is no reason institutions shouldn't be pursuing accessible and equitable policies for the benefit of their student population. Regardless

of which path I take for my research and dissertation, I know I want to focus on higher education and student success in some manner.

### **Summary and Conclusion**

As my first semester in the PhD Leadership and Policy program comes to an end, I feel extremely accomplished when I consider all of the readings, projects, and other assignments I've completed not only in ADS810, but in my other courses as well. Reflecting upon the guest speakers and completed dissertations exemplifies that, although the journey may be difficult, the accomplishments are worth the time and effort. Getting to know my diverse and dedicated cohort members and a handful of my instructors has been a great introduction to the program, and I am looking forward to expanding my knowledge, narrowing down my research interests, and ultimately completing my dissertation alongside my cohort.

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