

Enacting a relational approach as a university administrator: A self-study

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University professors, over the course of their careers, often assume leadership roles in their programs and institutions. Although leadership involves new skill sets and relationships, little is done to prepare professors transition to these roles, which may be assumed for a limited duration or lead to further administrative work. While there is a modest literature on the role of deans (e.g., Clift, Loughran, Mills & Craig, 2015), there is a notable gap in research for academics in mid-level administration (Ramirez & Allison, 2016). Indeed, it seems to be assumed that intelligence and good sense guide these gifted amateurs to sound decisions. This is in contrast to the business world, in which managers often have degrees in administration. In the field of education, aspiring school principals must complete a rigorous set of courses in order to qualify.

One substantive challenge in transitioning into a leadership position is a lack of understanding of educators' psychological processes, which "leaves educational leaders to develop their own sense-making practices while in the high-stress and complex act of leading" (Collins, 2016, p. 188). What kind of leader should one be? How is leadership similar to (and different from) one's approach to teaching and learning?

The purpose of this paper is to explore one professor's response to the challenges of transitioning to leadership roles through an examination of my experiences as an administrator in a faculty of education. From 2012-2016, I experienced the challenge of sense-making as the project lead for a major curriculum review and as the head of an academic unit in a faculty of education. As chair of the teacher education department's program committee, I served as project lead in the redevelopment of the teacher education program from one to two years (in response to a government mandate). I also served three years as the director of Indigenous research and education. The main objective is to critically reflect on my journals in order to consider the ways in which I was able to live out (or not) my conception of teacher education as relational. This builds on previous work on my development over fifteen years as a teacher educator (Kitchen, 2016b). More broadly, a second objective is to identify challenges and opportunities for extending the scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL), particularly the self-study of teaching and teacher education practices, to include practice-based research on leadership in higher education. While I am careful not to make general claims based on my own narrow set of experiences, it is my hope that it will resonate with the experiences of other professors in leadership position and encourage them to conduct similar inquiries.

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Theoretical Framework

The scholarship of teaching and learning “provides unique opportunities for faculty members to initiate positive changes to their teaching and learning practices” (Hubball & Clarke, 2010, p. 1), while engaging critical issues in higher education (Senge & Scharmer, 2008). Similarly, self-study provides teacher educators with opportunities to study their practices in a rigorous intellectual and practical manner (LaBoskey, 2004).

In 2005, I wrote two self-studies in which I presented relational teacher education (RTE) as an approach to preparing teachers (Kitchen, 2005a, 2005b). Underlying this work was an understanding that “education is development from within” (Dewey, 1938, p. 17) and a belief that teacher educators play a crucial role in fostering “experiences that lead to growth” (Dewey, 1938, p. 40) for preservice teachers. In these articles, I identified seven characteristics as important to RTE (Kitchen, 2005a):

1. Understanding one’s own personal practical knowledge;
2. Improving one’s practice in teacher education;
3. Understanding the landscape of teacher education;
4. Respecting and empathizing with preservice teachers;
5. Conveying respect and empathy;
6. Helping others face problems;
7. Receptivity to growing in relationship.

I then employed narrative self-study to explore how these characteristics informed my practice as a beginning teacher educator from 1999 to 2004. Seventeen years later, I continue to be active in teacher education and have published extensively on my efforts to live authentically alongside preservice teachers in relationships that lead to growth.

In this article, I revisit RTE and how it has informed my professional identity and professional practice as an administrator of teacher education programs. While I did not intentionally draw on RTE, it has become a *habitus* (Bourdieu, 1972/2002) that guides my way of being and acting in the world. Later, I became more conscious of the source of my judgment and wrote periodic journal entries on my reflections in action.

I consider Volckmann’s (2012) conceptions of *leadership* as “an inclusive concept involving the integration of (a) the *leader*, (b) *leading* in the role and (c) the context (culture, systems, processes, technologies) creating an integral perspective of leadership, including all *leadership development* (p. 259). In order to develop his conception, Volckmann created a four-quadrant holistic model:

1. Internal-Entity: The leader’s values, beliefs and experiences;
2. Internal-Context: The leader’s perceptions of contexts;
3. External-Entity: The influences on the leader such as biology, and the perceptions others have of them;
4. External-Context: How the culture, structures and processes impact the leader.

As Collins (in press) suggests, Volckmann’s work is useful in the self-study of educational leadership as it works at the intersection of self and practice in context.

I also draw on the four topical threads in administrator self-studies identified by Manke (2004): (1) Power (how one employs power and influence); (2) Community (working with leaders, faculty, staff and students); (3) social justice (using position to advance equity and diversity); and (4) Reform (coping with and/or leading reform initiatives).

Methods of Inquiry

SoTL and self-study are similar in their focus on practitioners asking inquiry questions that are contextualized in particular settings. They are also similar in their acceptance of “a wide range of methodological approaches” (Hubball & Clarke, 2010, p. 3) ranging from experimental design to grounded theory and narrative inquiry.

In this article, I employ narrative self-study, as a methodology appropriate to exploring my thinking as a new administrator. Narrative self-study is a useful term for self-studies that employ narrative inquiry to study the relationship between teacher educators and their practice:

Self-study is the noun because the focus of narrative self-study is the improvement of practice by reflecting on oneself and one’s practices as a teacher educator. *Narrative*, the adjective, refers to the use of specific narrative inquiry methods to study ourselves and our practices in order to improve practice. (Kitchen, 2009, p. 38)

I have found narrative self-study to be a multi-dimensional means of exploring the participant knowledge of teacher educators within our contexts and practices. Through narrative methods, I have been able to tell and retell stories of professional practice that have helped me understand my personal practical knowledge as a teacher (Clandinin & Connelly, 2004), develop critical understandings of my own practice, and share these stories with other teacher educators.

In this three-dimensional narrative inquiry space, the phenomena under study are my experiences as a teacher education administrator. I puzzle over the tensions I experience and the broader tensions inherent in administration by looking backward and forward, as well as inward and outward, while situating the experiences within a specific place (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). In the spirit of narrative inquiry, I am *wakeful* to multiple possibilities and complexities and mindful of the dangers of narcissism and Hollywood plots (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). In order to increase trustworthiness, I engaged in the systematic writing and collection of journal entries over time to ensure that accounts were authentic to the moment, rather than products of later recollection. This affords opportunities to critically analyze performance from different vantagepoints (Hamilton & Pinnegar, 2015). Also, for purposes of trustworthiness, the paper and some of the journal entries have been subject to analysis by critical friends who also serve in administrative roles (Mishler, 1990). I aspire to an *invitational quality* (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) that offers *apparency* and *verisimilitude* (Van Maanen, 1988) and transparency (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) rather than generalizability or tidy answers.

My data for this self-study are journal entries (16 over 2 ½ years) written during my tenure as an administrator, emails, and documents written in my role. These sources are subject to critical reflection and analysis through the frames of RTE, Volckmann’s conception of leadership, and Manke’s themes.

Analyzing and Interpreting Relational Teacher Education in a Leadership Context

I puzzle over my experiences, as documented in my journal, in order to critically reflect on how I drew on RTE to guide my efforts in leadership roles in teacher education. I also draw on the self-study literature on leadership to help make sense of the challenges I faced. This section is organized around the seven characteristics of RTE.

1. Understanding one’s own personal practical knowledge: In recent years, a significant amount of my energy has been devoted to program leadership, both as chair of the teacher education program committee and as director of Indigenous education. In these roles, I reflected on my own

experiences in order to guide others. In particular, my prior experiences as an educator and teacher educator had taught me the importance of recognizing the wealth of professional experiences of my colleagues (Kitchen, 2005a).

As the project lead in the design of a two-year preservice program (which I assumed as program chair), I wrote, “In order to be meaningfully engaged, I need to feel that my perspective is valued and considered” (Journal, January 25, 2014). Therefore, I structured working groups, faculty forums, committee meetings, and department meetings in ways that ensured opportunities for rich collaboration. The program evolved in ways I had not imagined, but in ways that reflected the collective wisdom of the group. I constantly challenged these groups to work within the parameters of the program—which had core principles and needed to consist of 10 full credits with 80+ practicum days—while ensuring that all voices [were] heard and included in the recommendations of the committee” (Journal, January 25, 2014). My confidence as a leader grew due to this experience in which I had in-depth experience (Internal-Entity), a strong understanding of the context (Internal-Context) and the high regard of colleagues in a time of crisis (External-Context).

As director of Indigenous educational programs, I was fully aware of my lack of cultural knowledge relative to my staff and the Indigenous populations served. In assuming this role, I examined my personal practical knowledge in order to identify what I could offer. Through self-understanding I was aware of my position of privilege as a white male of high socio-economic status (Kitchen, 2016). RTE also helped me be explicit about my strengths and limitations. Although my experiences were in the mainstream, I hoped that I could employ my social capital—my status as an educator, scholar and departmental leader—as a form of power (Manke, 2004). I also sought to build on my deep knowledge of teacher education and university processes knowledge and my connections in this community (Manke, 2004) to advance the social justice priorities identified by Indigenous staff, students and communities. I did not see myself as a traditional university administrator, but thought that “through the force of personality, persuasion, and justice I could press the university to reform the ways in which it worked with Indigenous communities (Journal, October 17, 2015). Yet, I also came in with considerably less internal and external capital. While I saw myself as a collaborative (though driven) leader, my status and forceful personality sometimes prompted others to capitulate. For example, due to the limits of my understanding of the Internal-Context, I persuaded an instructor to respond to a complaint in a manner that s/he was not comfortable, which would impact our relationship for much of my term.

I had blind spots, however, in how I understood my personal practical knowledge in relation to my role as director of Indigenous programs. I had failed to notice, in light of my recent success guiding the redesign of the teacher education program, that I was not as well connected with university administration as I was in my own department. In Volckmann’s conception, this represented a failure to appreciate the External-Context, particularly the people and processes above me. Unfortunately, rather than seek to engage in meaning making with senior administration, “I was dismissive of their hesitance about moving forward with urgency and sought to pressure them into doing what was right. I had evolved in my understandings, but did not do enough to take them on a similar journey” (Journal, December 19, 2015).

2. Improving one’s practice in teacher education: As a doctoral student, I had studied leadership theory and organizational change. While I had no interest in serving in administrative roles, I recognized the importance of leadership in improving instruction and building strong educational communities (Fullan, 1997). As a teacher educator I was a constructive change agent:

I was diligent in following procedure, supportive and appreciative of the efforts of leaders and support staff, and a persistent proponent of reform. I saw myself as a grain of sand that

agitated in the hope I could help form a pearl. And as someone who could use pressure and support (Fullan, 1993) to move agendas forward. It was out of a sense of duty and a commitment to transforming teacher education that I agreed to become program chair, a position I had neither sought nor expected. Similarly, I became director of Indigenous education because I recognized the Tecumseh Centre's vulnerability and saw myself as best positioned to advance its work. (Journal, March 14, 2014)

Whereas administrators often "assert their authority or withdraw from the fray" (Seymour, 1982, p. 160), I was determined to confront issues meaningfully and decisively to effect change. The government mandate to increase initial teacher education to two years provided me with an opportunity to become a change agent. Under my leadership, the Department of Teacher Education engaged in a two-year process of self-study and study of extended programs in other jurisdictions (Kitchen & Sharma, in press).

When I became director of Indigenous programs, I was determined to "transform the culture of the school" (Fullan, 1993, p. 86), not just manage programs and staff. I discovered, however, just how time and energy consuming administration can be. "It is only after staff leave at 4:30 that I can attend to the bigger picture," I wrote (Journal, April 2, 2014). This challenge was compounded by the requirement to write a comprehensive institutional self-study for a quality assurance process involving external assessors.

While I was committed to leading, and felt I had the Internal-Entity and Internal-Context qualities to effect change, I overestimated my ability to influence External-Context and underestimated the capacity of that external context to wear me down and resist my reform efforts (Volckmann, 2012). In short, I had prepared myself to work within the system as an agent of change, but may have lacked some of the dispositions and skills needed to apply RTE and the leadership literature to my administrative role. This is both a limitation of my internal characteristics and a reflection of my limited knowledge of how to work with administrators. Of course, it is also possible that the reform goals were too ambitious and the timing wrong.

3. Understanding the landscape of teacher education: As a teacher educator, I have witnessed many changes in the teacher education landscape. Political and cultural changes had a significant impact on schools and universities in Canada when I began graduate studies in the 1990's. The merger of teacher education and graduate institutions at University of Toronto led to major organizational challenges, especially as it took alongside province-wide curriculum reform and cuts in university funding. The merger, however, prompted major programmatic changes—the establishment of cohorts, an increased focus on reflective practice, stronger partnerships with schools, and opportunities for individual teacher educators to develop authentic professional relationships with students—that gave me the latitude to incorporate RTE into my work as a cohort leader. It was an exciting landscape on which to work as a teacher educator and I was given considerable license to be an innovator.

When I started teaching at the university in 2006, I was eager to change the internal educational landscape. While pleased with practice teaching cohorts, I was disappointed with the proliferation of specialized courses rather than a few courses that integrated multiple dimensions of learning to teach. I initially participated in change initiatives but, disappointed with the results, my attention turned to teaching and research.

In 2012, as program chair, I viewed the provincial government's consultation process on extending the duration of teacher education programs as an opportunity to re-imagine the program and engage faculty in a collaborative program design process. In 2013, we were informed of details of the new program requirements and of the 2015 implementation date. We had less than a year to

imagine the program, and another year to have program changes approved and curriculum developed. The externally imposed changes prompted much internal debate about the future of the teacher education program, while the tight timeline necessitated a level of decisiveness rare in colleges of education.

As the facilitator of the reform process, I applied principles of RTE to the departmental decision-making process. I worked closely with faculty teams to re-imagine curriculum and programming so that everyone felt engaged. In this process, we worked to align the politically imposed mandate with the values underlying the existing program and best practices identified in the teacher education literature. Rich discussion led to more innovative programming ideas. These ideas included more connections across curriculum domains, stronger theory-practice links, and more rigorous reflection on practice. The program culminates in a teacher-as-researcher course designed to prompt preservice teachers to become critical consumers of research and practitioners actively engaged in studying their practice. As I reflected at the time, “As a teacher educator, I had become content to make a difference in the lives of my students. Today I am hopeful that programmatic changes will lead to a program that is relational and prepares teachers to be adaptive experts for a dynamic and changing world” (Journal, June 7, 2014).

As director of Indigenous programs, however, my understanding of the landscape of education proved more limited. I was in a hurry while working with two cultures—Indigenous communities and university administration—which move slowly and methodically. I was confident that I could press for change based on my understanding of programmatic needs, but did not sufficiently adapt my approach to these strong and resilient cultures.

4. Respecting and empathizing with others in the organization: “Each adult learner has his or her own relationship to knowledge, and this relationship is influenced by the social and cultural characteristics of the individual’s life history,” according to Dominice (2001, p.83). This understanding, which has aided me in being respectful to students, has also guided my interactions with staff and colleagues.

As the project lead on teacher education redesign, I endeavoured to “engage faculty in a collaborative process in which all voices were heard” (Journal, October 19, 2013). I “accepted, sometimes with frustration, that each new group had to absorb the content and work through questions that were already processed by the working groups...yet each iteration also flagged problems and brought new insights.” After multiple stages and working drafts, there was a feeling that the new program was innovative and jointly owned by all full-time faculty; the sessional instructors were consulted but less involved in the expedited process.

Similarly, I made a genuine effort to respect and empathize with staff in the Tecumseh Centre. When I began in an interim capacity, I met every staff member individually for an hour to learn about them and their concerns:

I asked them for suggestions about how to improve the work of the Tecumseh Centre. I also called a monthly meeting of all staff to improve communication and teamwork. I may be the boss, but this is your Centre, I told them. As Indigenous staff you need to guide me in my decision-making. I regularly cleared with staff to ensure I conveyed the right tone in correspondence and reports. (Journal, May 11, 2014).

On one occasion, the administrative coordinator noted my description of Indigenous students as “pioneers blazing a trail.” I wrote at the time, “As an outsider, I will always regularly make tone-deaf mistakes unless I rely on the wisdom of staff and community members” (Journal, September 14, 2014).

As I grappled with my failure to effect dramatic changes in the funding of Indigenous programs, I reflected on a comment by an administrator:

I had worked out my thinking. I *knew* what needed to be done to improve Indigenous learning and to build the university's relationship with Indigenous communities. I *knew* that changes needed to be made in a timely manner. I *thought* that those above me lacked vision or commitment to social justice. In my exhaustion and frustration, I had forgotten to respect and empathize with them. And this was conveyed in my manner. (Journal, January 6, 2016)

While I was respectful and empathetic to staff and faculty, I now realize that I was not as respectful towards senior administration. I was respectful and appreciated senior management's dedication in difficult times but, I now realize, tended to see them as obstacles to overcome more than as colleagues with whom to engage in meaningful common work. I overestimated the force of my arguments, failed to appreciate that I was not well known by senior university administration, and did little to develop relationships of trust. I fought for social justice and reform, but failed to employ power/influence well or understand the community in which I was working.

Looking back I sometimes wonder if I would have enjoyed more success in effecting reform if I had seen them more as potential allies rather than as challenges to be overcome. At other times, I think that the external context and the power dynamics (Manke, 2004) made success unlikely. Either way, I did not live up to RTE in my interactions with them; indeed I ignored the political realities of university administration altogether.

5. Conveying respect and empathy: I was a master at conveying genuine respect and empathy to students. With multiple teaching, research and leadership commitments, I sometimes could be impatient with colleagues who seemed less engaged or resistant to change. This minor tendency seems to have expanded in my relationship with superiors. An administrator commented that I had shifted from "positive and hopeful" to "down, even pessimistic," to which I responded that "the university wants us to be entrepreneurial then thwarts every effort" (Journal, March 9, 2015). Impatience shone through even as I recognized that they were good people trying to do their jobs as best they could. I did not fully consider the multiple pressures placed on them as they tried to balance academic principles with managerial and financial challenges (Grimmett, 2015).

Another factor was the often adversarial role the faculty, as represented by a faculty association, has with administration. The faculty association often called administration to task for failing to make choices that resulted in more faculty and more funds to support learning. While I was sceptical of this position I may have internalized this attitude common among professors not directly involved in decision-making.

This was reinforced by my conception—and characterization—of myself as a reluctant administrator only serving as director in order to affect reform in the name of social justice. In my journal, I looked back on ways in which my manner conveyed disrespect:

At the meeting of the academic review committee, which received the Centre's self-study, I grudgingly responded to suggestions about how to change the report. I recall remarking on it as a tedious process that took away from attending to the work of the Tecumseh Centre. I recall saying "I will comply" in response to direction. While I did not roll my eyes, my tone no doubt conveyed condescension. (Journal, January 6, 2016)

This articulation of my identity as a reluctant administrator fighting for social justice, however, suggests limited political intelligence and respect for others committed to serving the university community.

6. Helping others face problems: As RTE has proven effective in my teaching practice, I have drawn on it to work through problems with staff and instructors in the Tecumseh Centre. I regularly sit down with staff to learn more about the issues confronting them in the programs they coordinate or support. For example, one of my coordinators runs a good program but regularly falls short of enrolment projections. I asked her plenty of questions, listened intently to her answers, and puzzled over the problem with her. The coordinator identified the difficulties Indigenous students had accessing government funding as a major problem. When she lamented that applicants were not eligible for government training funds, I suggested that we shorten the program by four months. This proved possible, but was a solution we could not have found without working through the problem together. Also, in meetings with community partners, we learned that our students would be more successful accessing funding if they began their program in May. After checking with the university, I discovered that it was indeed possible to alter the program's academic year to better serve students. This coordinator also thought that the curriculum needed to be renewed, so I advocated successfully for special funding for the development of new resources. The new program, adapted to current Indigenous pedagogies and epistemologies, began in September 2016. While it is too early to assess the impact of these changes, it was our shared engagement with the problem that identified alternative directions. In this case, my strong understanding of the education program context led to positive changes.

7. Receptivity to growing in relationship: As an administrator, my receptivity to growing in relationship is also appreciated by staff and instructors. In June 2014, at the meeting of the Indigenous program committee, an instructor publicly thanked me for being a 'cheerleader' for the work of staff and a tireless advocate for new ways of being responsive to community needs. A staff member praised my participation in community events. Another praised my humility as a non-Indigenous person because I always checked with staff before sending out reports and communiqués. As I often said to staff and other stakeholders, "I may be the white guy in charge, but it is your Centre and you know what is best for the community" (Journal, July 11, 2014). While there were many challenges as we work to expand much needed programming for Indigenous learners and communities, receptivity to growing in relationship made the work stimulating, meaningful and mutually rewarding.

While I was receptive to growing in relationship, I was tired of the politics of leadership: the endless paperwork, a culture of delay and inaction, and university staff that undermined reform efforts. This is consistent with Ramirez and Allison's (2016) "feelings of frustration with the overwhelming number of tasks that detracted from [my] teaching and scholarship" (p. 209). I might have drawn on Furman's (2012) critical framework for developing social justice leadership through praxis, as it mirrors RTE as a reflective, relational approach if I had been a school principal promoted up the ranks. I might have persisted in the face of the frustrations of advancing reform and social justice if this had been my most effective or meaningful way to make a difference. But, as I was only a temporary administrator, a faculty member taking his turn, I resigned down effective June 30, 2016. I recalled:

When I received the call to become program chair, I had just received a grant to study Indigenous education. I was productive as a scholar and developing a reputation in my fields of inquiry. In agreeing to serve, I recognized that it would diminish opportunities for scholarship. And it did, particularly when I became director of Indigenous education. Most particularly, I did not find the time to convert interesting data from my Indigenous study—and a subsequent study of Gay-Straight Alliances—into journal articles. The second edition

of my education law textbook was delayed, along with a social justice education book. New grant were applied for and received. Leadership opportunities emerged in my fields of study. I stepped down because the opportunity costs of administration simply proved too great! I could promote reform and social justice through my work as a teacher and scholar. I could make a difference without sacrificing the scholarship I loved. I could do so in ways that gave me great joy! (Journal, July 29, 2016)

I leave with greater humility, a better knowledge of my limits, and a deeper appreciation of the challenges of transformative leadership. Looking back on my five years in leadership positions, I see many successes due to my relational approach to curriculum and program leadership. I also wonder if I might have done more as Director of the Tecumseh Centre. Was bureaucratic inertia too strong to overcome? Would I have been more successful if I had been more relational in my approach to senior leadership? If I had received more support and professional development?

Significance

This modest exploration of my five years as a university administrator offers some insights into the lives of professors who assume such roles. I offer three concluding ideas for the consideration of the reader. First, the results of this self-study into my teacher education practice suggest that relational teacher development is sufficiently robust that it can be applied across teacher education contexts, from classroom teaching to field experience support to administration. This narrative self-study also contributes to the small but growing literature of teacher education administrator self-study. In particular, it considers the challenges of transition from teacher educator to administrator. The opportunities and challenges of leadership are considered along with the importance of maintaining and adapting one's values and skills as a teacher educator. RTE is sufficiently robust to apply to university administration as a tool for praxis (Furman, 2012) by professors enacting their visions of education. This is because it draws on the learning and teaching experiences of professors to help them make sense of their practice and build on their existing capacities.

Second, if professors are to be successful in administration, and encouraged to continue in these important roles, more needs to be done to support them. While it is useful to draw on one's prior experiences as an educator, there is also a need for professional preparation (Ramirez & Allison, 2016). This certainly should involve the notion of praxis, but also basic management strategies and particular ways to establish policies, practices and organizational cultures that promote reform and social justice (Cherkowski & Ragoonaden, 2016). Professional supports would help single-term administrators, increase their willingness to extend administrative terms, and better prepare academics interested in university administration as a career path.

Third, there is a need for more academics to share their experiences in administration with a view to developing a body of literature that will help professors thrive in these new and important roles. *Inside the role of dean: International perspectives on leading in higher education* (Clift, Loughran, Mills, & Craig, 2015) features chapters by several administrators on their experiences in leadership roles. The self-study community, which includes many teacher educators who have assumed leadership roles, is developing a growing strand of accounts by principals, chairs, directors and deans (e.g., Collins, 2016; Kitchen, 2016a; Ramirez & Allison, 2016; Manke, 2004). Similarly, university professors involved in SoTL are well positioned to advance this field of professional inquiry by recounting their administrative experiences in a manner similar to how they have approached understanding and improving learning in their classes.

Finally, I suggest that all facets of university administration would benefit from inquiry by academics serving in administrative roles, I offer the following topics of particular interest for

scholarship in this area: the challenges of transitioning to a new role, balancing academic principles with managerial responsibilities, and learning to work critically and empathetically with senior administrators.

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