

Growing in Leadership: Examining Professional Development Reflections and Their Impact on Doctoral Students

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For this study, the researchers examined the professional development reflections written by five graduate students who took part in a two-year leadership-based program situated at a university in the United States. Data collection consisted of monthly written reflections gathered after each month in the program from September 2023 to May 2024, as well as Google Form surveys from fall 2023 and spring 2024. Open coding was utilized and findings showed four main reflection themes and the impact these monthly professional development tasks had on student learning and growth. Future research modifications will also be detailed.

Keywords: graduate student, leadership, professional development, mentoring

INTRODUCTION

Mentoring programs at the collegiate level range greatly, such as undergraduates working with industry partners (Hamilton et al., 2019), graduate students mentoring faculty in technology (Baran, 2016), online graduate mentoring programs (Pollard & Kumar, 2021; Wheeler, et al., 2022; 2024; 2025), graduate students mentoring undergraduates (Mabrouk & Remijan, 2023), or even recent graduate students being mentored after graduation (Zhang et al., 2016). Partnerships such as these can also produce various bonds, such as in Lechaga's (2011) work, where the faculty were seen as "Allies, Ambassadors, and Master-Teachers" (p. 757).

Therefore, the purpose of our research is to examine the impact of professional development offerings that five doctoral students who are a part of a two-year leadership program at a public university in the United States chose for their monthly reflection work. More specifically, our research questions were the following:

RQ1: *What themes emerged from monthly graduate student reflections centered around the ideas of leadership?*

RQ2: *What impact did the monthly reflections have on graduate students' perceptions about themselves?*

METHODOLOGY

Participants in this study consisted of five doctoral students who were chosen to be a part of the second cohort of a two-year leadership program for graduate students at a primarily female public doctoral-granting university in the United States. The program was open to all graduate students in all programs on campus, including low-residency programs and online. Each student applied for the grant program by writing a project proposal where they had to select a faculty/professional mentor, internal or external to the university, and describe a research plan they would focus on during the period of the grant. From the applicant pool, five female doctoral students were chosen from the following disciplines: Counseling Psychology; Dance; Literacy and Learning; Rhetoric; and Sociology. Four of the students remained in the mentoring program for the full two years, while one student withdrew from the program a semester early.

Requirements of the program included Zoom meetings with the two project leads a total of four times during each academic year. Written work involved multiple pieces. Completing monthly written reflections (1-2 page, single spaced) about a topic pertaining to leadership issues on a podcast and/or webinar of the students' choosing was the participants' most common task required of the program. They also turned in Google Forms that were completed at the end of fall, spring, and summer terms that addressed their work from the most recent semester, as well as any questions/concerns that had moving forward in the program.

Data were compiled and coded in Google Docs. One of the researchers utilized open coding (Corbin & Strauss, 2008) for the first round of coding and confirmed coding schemes with the second researcher. The two researchers then used axial coding (Corbin & Strauss, 2008) to create the four main ideas that tied the subcodes together. Discrepancies were discussed until 100% agreement.

In the following paragraphs, we detail the findings from our analysis. Pseudonyms were given to participants to protect confidentiality. Sample student reflections will also be discussed.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

RQ1: Reflection Themes

The data were coded with four main themes that arose: *Academic Identity*, *Authentic Self*, *Equity*, and *Self-Care*. Table 1 details the codes and four themes in the data.

TABLE 1
CODED DATA

Themes	Codes
Academic Identity	Be a better leader Being too polite ChatGPT in academia Making an impact in academics Providing useful feedback Publishing
Authentic Self	Authentic self as a teacher Being your authentic self Latina representation-being myself
Equity	Equity in teaching Equity in mentorship Latinas as leaders Power-sharing Social empathy (care about others) Women as leaders

Themes	Codes
Self-Care	ADHD Anxiety Being mindful in the moment Believe in yourself Burnout Confidence Deficit thinking and perfectionism Handling disappointment Impact of social media on self Imposter syndrome Leadership and disappointment Mental strength Motivation Not hating oneself Perception of age Persistence Rejection Self-compassion Thought impacts self-belief

The first theme, *Academic Identity*, was derived from the students' abilities to figure out who they are as scholars and leaders in their roles of budding researchers and future PhDs. Topics within this category varied from understanding how to publish and act in professional settings to the use of artificial intelligence in the classroom.

The second theme, *Authentic Self*, manifested itself from the writings of the graduate students about podcasts they searched for expressing themselves as their true personalities, not worrying about what others thought or how they would be perceived.

Equity, the third theme in the data, resonated with the participants in the form of podcast selections that dealt with equity issues in multiple settings.

Lastly, the fourth theme of *Self-Care* was a much sought-after ideal that all students gravitated the most towards. As can be seen from the table, the issues were diverse, such as anxiety, imposter syndrome, perception of age, and mindfulness.

These four codes embodied the main ideas that the five graduate students sought knowledge about during their first year of the leadership program. To learn more about the impact of these codes, we explored more deeply the impact of these themes through student reflections with our second research question.

RQ2: Impact of Reflections on Students' Ideals About Their Future in Academia

Table 2 details the percentage of how much the graduate students wrote about each of the four themes.

TABLE 2
THEMES AND PARTICIPANT INFORMATION

Topic	Participant and Frequency	Percent
Academic Identity	Bianca (1) Carmen (2) Layla (3) Tia (1) Vera (0)	15.6
Authentic Self	Bianca (0) Carmen (1) Layla (2) Tia (1) Vera (1)	11.1
Equity	Bianca (1) Carmen (0) Layla (1) Tia (3) Vera (3)	17.8
Self-Care	Bianca (7) Carmen (6) Layla (3) Tia (4) Vera (5)	55.6

As the table illustrates, over half of the total reflections dealt with self-care, as well as each student wrote about issues related to self-care the most of any other topic. No other topic dominated the reflections, which is not surprising when you think about the difficulties that being a graduate student in a post-COVID world can bring.

At the end of each semester, the researchers asked the graduate students to reflect on what learning they felt they gained from the written reflection work. In the following paragraphs, we will detail their responses from the fall and spring semesters. First up is Bianca.

Bianca

Bianca used the monthly reflections as “guideposts that provided helpful insight” as she progressed throughout the program. She researched various topics ranging from leadership to mindfulness to academic culture with 7 of her 9 reflections being from the area of *Self-Care*. In the below quote, Bianca discussed how the reflections impacted her life, even if it might be challenging to dedicate the time to completing the task:

The reflections created the time and space for me to take an assessment of how things are going at a point in time. That is helpful because it is so easy to allow the busyness of school and work to mask what true feelings are. I like the flexibility of choosing a topic that is of interest at the current time and exploring it and my feelings. It is a bit like working out. I do not always want to do it, but I always feel better and notice a difference after I do.

Carmen

Our second graduate student was Carmen. Carmen struggled with self-confidence in her field. She often chose *Self-Care* topics (6 of the 9 reflections), such as ones that spoke to the ideals of imposter syndrome that pervaded many of her monthly reflections. In the below quote from Carmen, one can see how the reflections helped her develop skills she felt were not covered in her doctoral coursework, but were important to her future career:

It's incredibly helpful to have time specifically to work on things like speaking that we do not cover in our classwork. Specific time to reflect on skills that are necessary in academia that don't come naturally to me has been wonderful. It is wonderful to have time set aside to work on skills like public speaking that we don't necessarily get to develop in our regular coursework.

Layla

Layla, our third graduate student, connected her reflections to personal experiences in her life, which was fairly balanced among *Academic Identity*, *Authentic Self*, and *Self-Care*. She also included a reflection about *Equity* that rounded out her year of work. Concerning the impact of her reflection, Layla stated, "I was able to make connections to my own experiences. I allowed myself to be vulnerable and share negative and positive experiences." These experiences in her life shaped who she was as a person, and she was able to flesh out the ideas through the monthly writings. A perfect example of this impact was displayed in her December Google Form update where she discussed destructive thoughts that have plagued her in the past:

I allowed myself to create a false persona in my previous careers. However, moving forward, I am taking charge and executing my authentic self. In being my authentic self, I will exhibit qualities such as compassionate, understanding, patience, sympathetic and empathetic. My authentic self is also quiet, an effective listener, giving, thoughtful, no malice, harbor no jealousy when others succeed, and loves the Lord. I believe these qualities and many more are the characteristics of a leader. Both Bury (2020) and Smith (2022) Ted talks reminded me to authentically connect with people and stop trying to prove my worth to others. I have wasted a lot of time trying to prove my worth to others. I want to be a better person. To be a better person, I have to just be me.

Tia

Tia, our fourth graduate student, focused mainly on the issues of *Equity* and *Self-Care* in her monthly reflections. She detailed the benefits she found in writing in the fall Google Form update and stated, "I value the time I spend writing the reflections because it allows me the space to contemplate and visualize the kind of leader/mentor I want to be in the future." She further elaborated in the spring about the lasting impression these tasks would have on her future in academia:

I enjoyed searching for podcasts, webinars, and seminars that piqued my interest in female leadership and professional achievement. Some of the presentations I just watched or listened to for fun, even if I chose not to write about it. Because my discipline is writing heavy, it was helpful to practice this skill through the written reflections. What I liked most about these reflections was getting to hear from a diverse group of women from all walks of life. I learned about different leadership styles and approaches to work from women of various fields, industries, educational and life experiences. Reflecting on this knowledge has helped me consider my own role as a future Latina leader in higher education.

Vera

For Vera, our fifth graduate student, her monthly reflections centered on mainly *Equity* and *Self-Care*. She valued the opportunities to freely choose the subject matter she felt was important to her and her growth

in higher education and professionally. The below quote from spring describes these sentiments, as well how she felt the reflections provided written proof of her progress in these areas:

I enjoy the opportunity to reflect on my musings from the month and having a space to write expressively in a way that allows me to integrate my personal, professional, and academic growth. I also appreciate having written reflections as documentation of my own growth and thought processes involving my research.

CONCLUSION

As can be seen from the participants' work, the graduate students in this study researched the benefits of *Academic Identity*, *Authentic Self*, *Equity*, and *Self-Care* as part of their work in the mentoring program. The most researched topic was *Self-Care* with over half of the reflections written on topics in this category. Similar to the beliefs of Driscoll et al. (2020), we believe that self-care should play a bigger role in academia, including part of the conversation and modeled for others to see.

Pertaining to the students' most significant takeaways from the program, the work from the reflections were paramount. The reflections provided graduate students the time to take a step back and focus on topics that might not have been covered in their disciplines, such as public speaking. In addition, the reflections also gave the participants the chance to listen to leaders in academia from different fields who brought significant insight that the participants might not have listened to without these given monthly tasks. The graduate students oftentimes wrote very openly about struggles from their past, as well as some issues that still plagued them in their current lives. One even wrote about being able to see her growth throughout the program through this written documentation over the past year.

FUTURE RESEARCH

As part of future research, we plan to continue to investigate the impact of monthly reflections but focus participants' attention on the use of artificial intelligence (AI) in higher education. AI is a hot button topic right now, so the researchers felt that exposing the graduate students to this topic would be an important issue for them to consider since most of the participants want to continue in higher education as a career.

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