

# Journal of Contemporary Research in Education



THE UNIVERSITY of  
**MISSISSIPPI**

SCHOOL OF EDUCATION

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# Journal of Contemporary Research In Education

VOLUME 6 | NUMBER 1 | FALL 2017

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**The mission of JCRE is to disseminate original research, empirical or theoretical in nature, which involves the application of current philosophy, theory, and practice to address issues of social importance. While the journal will focus on research with the intent of improving the human condition, manuscripts addressing all aspects of the field of education, school-based and non school-based alike, will be considered. JCRE is strongly committed to making the research findings of its authors accessible to all constituencies in the field of education.**

JCRE is a peer-reviewed publication sponsored by the School of Education at the University of Mississippi. Published 2 times annually (Fall, Spring). JCRE disseminates research, which is judged to be clear and purposeful, with significant implications for positive changes in the field of education.

**Manuscript Preparation.** Manuscripts should be prepared according to the guidelines set forth in the 6<sup>th</sup> edition of the *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association* (APA), should be approximately 15-25 pages in length, and must be accompanied by an abstract no longer than 200 words. A short biography of 2-3 sentences per author is requested. Manuscripts should be formatted for 8 ½” x 11” paper with 1” margins on all sides, and double-spaced using 12-point type. Manuscript files, and any accompanying files, should be in MS Word format: PDFs will not be accepted.

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**Manuscript Review.** Manuscripts submitted to JCRE for consideration are first reviewed internally by the editor. Those conforming to the initial review criteria and fulfilling the mission of JCRE will be submitted for external peer review. The criteria for judging the manuscripts include: (a) significance of research and/or theoretical contribution, (b) appropriateness of the research methodology, (c) clarity of the writing, (d) adherence to the guidelines set forth in the 6<sup>th</sup> edition of the *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association* (APA). Manuscripts meeting the criteria will be reviewed by at least two peers, a process that lasts from 6 -8 weeks.

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## **\*\*\*\*\*Call for Manuscripts\*\*\*\*\***

The *Journal of Contemporary Research in Education* is soliciting manuscripts for future issues. Submissions should be prepared according to the guidelines set forth in the 6<sup>th</sup> edition of the *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association* (APA) and should be submitted electronically to the attention of the Editor at [gauthier@olemiss.edu](mailto:gauthier@olemiss.edu). Manuscripts across all areas of educational inquiry will be considered. Cross-disciplinary collaboration is encouraged. For more information, see the section at the beginning of this issue addressing manuscript preparation, submission, and review.

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**I  
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This special issue of the *Journal of Contemporary Research in Education* is devoted to—*The Power of Higher Education to Transform Lives, Communities, and the World*—the theme for the investiture of Dr. Jeffrey S. Vitter as the 17<sup>th</sup> Chancellor of the University of Mississippi. With a core focus on transformational education and leadership, this issue seeks to inspire members of the campus community to improve the socioeconomic trajectories, health, and well-being for all who are serviced by and seek knowledge within institutions of higher learning. Building upon the institutional challenges and opportunities identified by Chancellor Vitter on November 16, 2016, this edition demonstrates how those who listened to him made sense of his charge for higher education generally, and the University of Mississippi, specifically. In the global era that has come to define the 21<sup>st</sup> century, such a charge for personal reflection, professional accountability, and institutional action is transformational in and of itself—which is why this special issue is so very timely and important.

This issue is comprised of seven, original essays which examine the authors' experiences and understandings of the transformational aspects of higher education. On an individual level, the essays invite readers to explore teaching, research, and service in different fields of study—Business; Education; Engineering; Health, Exercise Science, and Recreation Management; Integrated Marketing and Communications; Journalism; and Social Work. As a collective, the essays provide analytical lenses for approaches to change through higher education—suggesting strategies that will serve and promote the greater good by expanding opportunities for educational access and success.

The lead essay is written by Chancellor Jeffrey S. Vitter and contains excerpts from his investiture address. Chancellor Vitter's essay serves as the nexus for contemplating the issue's focus—in his words, “building vibrant lives and communities through higher education.” Vitter recounts examples of signature activities and accomplishments of the University of Mississippi to demonstrate how the University and the Medical Center enliven the academic mission and even more importantly, respond to the considerable social responsibilities for the state, region, nation, and now, the world as a Carnegie R-1 university. To exemplify how higher education changes lives, the Chancellor tells the story of an alumnus, the late Marion McManus, who used poverty as a formative experience to motivate himself to complete his degree and succeed in business. In addition, Vitter previews new activities intended to tap into the power of interdisciplinary research and creative collaborations among scholars and various partners, to promote economic and community development, to expand engagement and outreach, and to serve others.

Building upon the ideals and examples set forth in Chancellor Vitter's essay, the remaining essays offer nuanced perspectives on transformational thinking and change-making in society through higher education. References to higher education within each essay are broadly defined and fully encompassing of the entire educational spectrum and / or continuum (i.e., secondary, postsecondary, and higher and continuing education). There is great intentionality in referencing *higher education* in this way because it conveys a greater sense of purpose, gives a broader lens for assessing the lasting value of the entire educational enterprise, and reminds all stakeholders of the continuous and holistic gains of education (in general) via the perennial and life-long pursuit of knowledge.

The second essay is written by Jonathan Blake Bostick, who serves as an Admissions Counselor at the University of Mississippi's DeSoto campus. His essay makes the case for understanding education as a basic and necessary civil right; arguably, a human right that enables and sustains life. Bostick briefly

reminds readers of the landmark case of *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) that ostensibly ended legal segregation only to usher in a de facto era of segregation also with devastating implications. Mr. Bostick's essay explores (with great facility) the transformation and change that can be advanced via careful and focused attention to public policies and laws meant to eradicate educational disparities and discrimination, thereby upholding the civil rights and liberties of all to a high-quality education.

As a compliment to Mr. Bostick's essay, the third essay focuses intently on transformational thinking and ways of learning within the college classroom. Written by Dr. Amy K. Fisher, Assistant Professor of Social Work at the University of Mississippi, the essay offers critical linkages to Mr. Bostick's essay and the special issue's overall theme thought its emphasis on developing cognitive complexity in students, particularly graduate students, and the useful role of cognitive complexity in advancing the quality of learning for all. Dr. Fisher posits that cognitive complexity – as an educational imperative enables students to better engage and navigate multifaceted challenges, opportunities, and events within their personal and professional lives. Immediate and obvious outcomes include enhanced critical thinking and analytic ability, greater cultural competency and display of empathy, a heightened sense of discernment and global awareness, more complex funds of knowledge related to social agency and change, and more nuanced conceptualizations of reality. Each outcome is considered transformational because each promotes more socially responsible, thoughtful, and holistic decision-making and acting among students. The end goal is to foster, within graduates, a critical awareness and mindfulness of their actions along with their ability to serve as agents of positive and lasting, social change.

The fourth and fifth essays focus intentionally on differentiated strategies of leadership and instruction, along the continuum, which the authors believe lead to transformational change and increased equity in higher education. The fourth essay is authored by Dr. Denver J. Fowler, Assistant Professor of



Educational Leadership and Policy Studies at California State University-Sacramento, and offers a personal analysis and reflection on the role of higher education in transforming the lives of individuals from historically underrepresented and/or socioeconomically marginalized backgrounds. In sharing his account as a low-income, first-generation collegian, Dr. Fowler offers a candid discussion of the many obstacles students can and often do encounter when attempting to expand their horizons through higher education pursuits. Within his essay, Dr. Fowler uses the identified obstacles to help frame a broader discussion of the need as well as the opportunities for more transformational and equity-based leadership within institutions of higher learning. He offers differentiated leadership as an effective change strategy to help transform the educational experiences of all students and to ensure equitability regarding student access and success.

The fifth essay is authored by Dr. Brenda Hutton-Prager, Assistant Professor of Chemical Engineering at the University of Mississippi, and details the importance of instructional innovation and differentiated teaching and learning within the college classroom. Dr. Hutton-Prager uses the science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) classroom as an analytic lens for examining ways to improve the quality of higher education via personalized or differentiated learning – which seemingly allows for more expansive and intentional thinking about broadening the pathways of educational participation and advancement for all students. In her essay, Dr. Hutton-Prager challenges readers to employ multi-disciplinary and student-centered, active learning approaches to improve learning in STEM and broaden access and participation in higher education (across disciplines).

The final essays within this special edition offer more varied perspectives of transformational education and leadership—perspectives which encourage readers to contemplate the roles of discursive and institutional leadership in promoting

transformative, change strategies in higher education and society at large. Dr. Milorad M. Novicevic, Associate Professor of Management at the University of Mississippi, examines retrospectively the recorded catalog of official statements (both written and oral) and social media posts of Chancellor Vitter, asserting that he is a higher education leader whose communication style and leadership abilities, especially when advancing organizational and institutional change strategies, are congruent with the core principles of discursive leadership as advanced by Fairhurst (2007). Dr. Novicevic aptly defines the conceptual framework of discursive leadership within his essay to make sense of and give meaning to the Chancellor's communications. As a whole, the identified practices are deemed exemplary by Novicevic—from a higher education stance—because they promote sustained, constituent engagement and collaboration during organizational change-making processes.

As a follow-up to Dr. Novicevic's essay, Drs. Alicia C. Stapp (Assistant Professor of Health and Physical Education), Melinda W. Valliant (Associate Professor of Nutrition), M. Allison Ford (Associate Professor of Health Promotion), and Kristen A. Swain (Associate Professor of Journalism) provide a concluding essay on the types of synergistic interaction and collaborative teaching, research, and service endeavors that can be advanced institutionally to promote the general health and well-being of Mississippi's citizens. Their essay examines unique programs, practices, and opportunities made available at the University of Mississippi to show how the institution can channel its diverse resources (both human and monetary) to help eradicate health disparities.

This body of essays have been selected because of their attentiveness to and appreciation for the subtleties of transformation made possible through higher education. We are confident that this special issue of the *Journal of Contemporary Research in Education* demonstrates the overarching need for imaginative thinking, innovative approaches,

and inspired leadership that will make higher education institutions more vital and lives and communities more vibrant. Just as the investiture of the University of Mississippi's 17<sup>th</sup> Chancellor summons both symbol and substance, this special issue seeks to do the same and to remind us all of the greater and longer-lasting purpose of higher education—to be a beacon of hope that lights the way toward greater prosperity, equality, and enlightenment for all.

publications reflect these interests and have appeared in the *International Journal, Higher Education Teaching and Learning; Higher Education: Handbook of Theory and Research; Today's College Students: A Reader*, and *Expanding the Donor Base in Higher Education*. **Dr. Wells Dolan** can be reached at [aewells@olemiss.edu](mailto:aewells@olemiss.edu).

### References

Fairhurst, G. T. (2007). *Discursive leadership: In conversation with leadership psychology*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publishing.

**Dr. Phillis George** is currently an Assistant Professor in the Department of Higher Education within the School of Education at The University of Mississippi. Her research concerns issues related to democratic engagement and social responsiveness among colleges and universities along with the promotion of social justice, equity, and ethics in college teaching and learning and higher education administration. She also conducts focused research on civic engagement and academic service-learning. Dr. George earned a doctorate in Educational Leadership & Policy Analysis (with an emphasis in Higher Education) from the University of Wisconsin-Madison and a master's degree in Sociology from Oxford University (United Kingdom). **Dr. George** can be reached at [plgeorge@olemiss.edu](mailto:plgeorge@olemiss.edu).

**Dr. Amy Wells Dolan** is the Associate Dean of the School of Education and Associate Professor in Higher Education. Her background includes Student Affairs administration and fundraising and her research focuses on the history of higher education in the South. She is deeply involved with the development and implementation of the Carnegie Project on the Education Doctorate (CPED) doctoral program with an emphasis in Higher Education as well as the larger CPED initiative in the School of Education at the University of Mississippi. Her recent

**Jeffrey S. Vitter**  
*The University of Mississippi*

**Abstract**

This essay examines the powerful impact that higher education has on changing lives, communities, and the world; how it creates opportunities, inspires new ideas, spurs innovations, and is the great enabler that allows people to create better futures. The essay provides illustrative examples from the University of Mississippi across a broad spectrum of areas. First, the essay examines how higher education offers a range of opportunities from inspiring and challenging the most prepared students to providing an accessible and affordable education to all qualifying students. The essay then describes how a modern university's vision transcends the intellectual development of students and assumes the role of being an agent of change in the greater community. This change takes many forms including healthcare, economic development, education outreach, community service, and entrepreneurship. It also describes the key role that higher education plays in bettering communities through the nurturing of diversity. Finally, the essay emphasizes the importance of continually striving to make learning environments greater and educating students — tomorrow's leaders — to prosper in a global society. It concludes that one of the greatest callings in life is to make the lives of others better and that higher education is uniquely positioned to transform lives and communities — from across the street to across the globe.

*The following essay contains excerpts from Chancellor Vitter's November 10, 2016 investiture address at the University of Mississippi in Oxford, Mississippi.*

In a 2003 speech, Nelson Mandela succinctly captured the empowering nature of education when he called it “the most powerful weapon you can use to change the world.” Higher education creates opportunities, inspires new ideas, and spurs innovations that drive our economy and society forward. Most importantly, higher education is the great enabler that allows people to rise above their circumstances and create a better future — there is nothing more important to the continued growth and success of our society than higher education.

Twenty years ago, Chancellor Robert Khayat envisioned that the University of Mississippi would become a great American public university. UM has achieved it and more, having reached the status of a great public *international research* university. And while all great institutions share many fantastic attributes, none is more primary than the

many areas, and chief among them is academic excellence. In that regard, the University of Mississippi is flourishing. The value of a University of Mississippi degree continues to increase, as demonstrated by the continued growth of the student body, which has doubled in size over the last 20 years. UM is the largest university in the state, with the largest freshman enrollment, the highest average entering ACT score and grade point average, as well as the highest retention rate. On a national level, UM's unique academic programs and learning experiences, such as the Sally McDonnell Barksdale Honors College, the Barbour Center for Manufacturing Excellence, the Lott Leadership Institute, the Croft Institute for International Studies, and the McLean Institute for Public Service and Community Engagement, stand out among the nation's very best.

And for the first time in school history, in February 2016, the University of Mississippi achieved the pinnacle of research excellence: a designation of “R1 highest research activity” by the Carnegie Classification

of Institutions of Higher Education — a stature afforded to a distinguished group of 115 institutions representing the top 2.5% of colleges and universities nationwide. The R1 designation strengthens the transformative impact that universities such as UM have in a number of areas, including the vital economic role that a world-class research institution plays in the state and region.

Higher education offers a broad range of opportunities from inspiring and challenging our most prepared students to providing an accessible and affordable education to all qualifying Mississippi students. UM has established programs that enable students to succeed and thrive. The Sally McDonnell Barksdale Honors College, created 20 years ago, attracts the highest-performing students. The SMBHC provides a vibrant center of academic excellence to encourage students' transformation to citizen scholars, committed to the public good and driven to find solutions in their fields and for their communities and the world.

To ensure the intellectual and personal growth of students from all backgrounds, in 2010 UM implemented the Ole Miss Opportunity program — the first of its kind in Mississippi — to provide full need-based scholarships to all qualifying Mississippi students for their entire education. UM is committed to extending a quality education to the broadest range of deserving students, regardless of circumstance, embodying the OMO program motto, “From here, it’s possible.” Additionally, through the Mississippi Outreach to Scholastic Talent mentoring program, UM matches incoming students and high school seniors with upperclass mentors to help guide and support them through the admission process and first year at the university.

A wonderful example of the transformative power of higher education upon an individual life is the late Marion McManus, who grew up on a small farm in Mississippi, one of nine children. His parents’ home had no electricity or running water, and every day he

and his siblings were expected to pick cotton after school to help make ends meet. McManus’ son noted that, “Growing up with that hardship gave him a lot of drive and ambition to make a better life for himself, and he realized that having an education was an important part of that.” The business degree McManus earned from UM in 1950 planted within him the seeds for success, and he nurtured that education to go from his very humble beginnings to become a highly successful businessman.

While academic excellence is at the heart of the university’s mission, a modern university’s vision transcends the intellectual development of students and assumes the role of being an agent of change in the greater community. The University of Mississippi promotes economic and community development through its many forms of community-engaged scholarship, such as partnerships, collaborative projects, and entrepreneurship. A key part of a flagship institution’s mission is to build healthy and vibrant communities — a mandate that takes many forms. The University of Mississippi embraces its responsibility as a flagship, sea grant, space grant, and Carnegie R-1 university to address our country’s most pressing issues.

Universities must make a commitment to keep our communities — and the people who live in them — healthy. As the state’s only academic medical center, the University of Mississippi Medical Center, is uniquely positioned to lead healthcare strategy for the state and the region. UMMC receives over one million patient visits each year and is a national leader in telemedicine. It is the preeminent complement to local hospitals and sustainable community healthcare, providing the leading venue in the state for trauma, pediatrics, transplants, and telehealth. And efforts to improve the health of Mississippians are continuing with the new Bower School of Population Health and its Department of Data Science. Only the third of its kind in the country, the Bower School will transform healthcare practice and delivery in Mississippi and beyond.

Aside from health, universities impact communities through educational outreach. Consider for example that each year UM graduates a new cadre of students from the School of Education's Mississippi Excellence in Teaching Program. These students are among the best and brightest anywhere, and they commit to staying in Mississippi to teach Mississippi children, impacting future generations of Mississippians.

Every day, we see the positive impact universities can have on issues facing our state, nation, and world. Take, for example, the McLean Institute for Public Service and Community Engagement. Through programs like the CEED (Catalyzing Entrepreneurship and Economic Development), the Institute works with communities across Mississippi to increase entrepreneurship and promote economic development in rural communities.

Institutions of higher education also impact communities through economic development and contribute to new businesses and technology. At UM, FNC is our most recent and biggest success story. Co-founded 20 years ago by four UM professors, FNC sold last year for more than \$400M, creating 45 millionaires overnight. It represents the largest acquisition of a technology company in Mississippi in recent history. But not all success has to be on such a large scale. UM also works with start-up companies — currently 17 of them — that license UM-created technologies across a broad range of industries. These endeavors are realizations of innovation and collaboration as well as the research-to-commercialization continuum that drives economic development. They also illustrate the important role that higher education plays in our state by providing access to unique talents and innovations that have the ability to transform the economic status and quality of life of all Mississippians.

Through community engagement and service, Ole Miss touches lives and communities from across the street to across the globe. A great example occurs each spring when Ole Miss students volunteer all over Oxford and Lafayette County as part of *The Big Event*, the

university's largest community service project with thousands of students participating in hundreds of services projects.

The transformative power of higher education can also be felt on the international level. The UM campus Feed the Hunger Pack-a-Thon campaign was launched seven years ago to provide meals for impoverished children in Kenya, Haiti, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Nepal, Jamaica, and rural Kentucky. UM was the first university in the nation to partner with the nonprofit organization in conducting pack-a-thon events. Over the course of the last seven years, the UM Pack-a-Thon has packed 1 million meals.

There are other instances of UM impact upon international communities, such as a group of UM student-athletes who have visited Haiti for the last three years to help bring fresh water to a community in order to provide crop irrigation for farmers, as well as digging wells to provide locals with fresh water. And the UM Engineers without Borders work in Togo in Africa to build schools, develop wells, and clean water supplies, as well as bring clean water to a new children's hospital.

Consider the impact of UM's community service programs. In the 2014-2015 academic year, the UM community served over 620,000 hours of community service, contributing \$12 million to the state economy.

All this service at the local and global levels is key to keeping our communities vibrant.

Another way UM will embrace our role in building healthy and vibrant communities is to channel the talents of the entire university and partner with towns and cities around the state — one at a time — to enhance every aspect of community life. The needs in Mississippi's communities are great, and UM is committed to collaborating with them on joint projects harnessing the full range of university expertise — from medicine and population health to policy and law, science and engineering, business and entrepreneurship, education, arts, and culture.

Going forward, UM will continue to

envision new ways to capitalize upon resources and make an even bigger impact on the state of Mississippi. One way will be to accelerate and inspire solutions to some of society's grandest challenges through the establishment of innovative, high-impact multidisciplinary research and creative achievement clusters, as part of a new program called the Flagship Constellations Initiative. Flagship Constellations will comprise clusters of faculty, staff, students, alumni, and partners to address compelling challenges for which no single discipline has all the answers — where only collaboration and deep insights from multiple points of view will provide solutions. Flagship Constellations will serve as an avenue to excel by attracting stellar personnel to UM to work with the incredible talent already in place — bringing together people and ideas in fresh and unique ways to boost innovation, grant funding, scholarly visibility, and international prominence.

Another key role that higher education plays in bettering our communities is through the nurturing of diversity, which goes hand in hand with academic excellence. Diversity — in ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, nationality, culture, academic training, and scholarly discipline — makes communities more vibrant. Diversity makes our ideas better, our approaches more effective, our results stronger, and our relationships deeper. Embracing the unique ideas and perspectives represented on our higher education campuses makes us more imaginative and innovative communities. Diversity in higher education prepares students to become engaged citizens, fosters mutual respect and teamwork, and helps build communities whose members are judged by their character and their contributions.

We live in an increasingly complex world with many pressing problems. We must continually strive to make our learning environments greater, and we must educate our students — tomorrow's leaders — to prosper in a global society. We will accomplish these goals through our people. People are our greatest asset. Universities must continue to invest in

people, reward them, and appreciate them. Nothing higher education seeks to accomplish will be possible without great people. As Jim Collins, the author of *Good to Great*, observes, “great vision without great people is irrelevant.” At UM, our people are the comprehensive enabler for all that we might do in achieving excellence and building healthy and vibrant communities.

All of us will ultimately be defined by what we leave behind. And I believe that our greatest calling in life is to make the lives of others better, which is why I so passionately believe in the power of higher education to transform lives, communities, and the world. Through 37 years in higher education, I have seen that there is no better way to help people lift themselves up and create meaningful and rewarding lives.

**Jeffrey S. Vitter** is the 17th chancellor of the University of Mississippi, as well as Distinguished Professor of Computer and Information Science. He is a renowned computer scientist, and a passionate advocate for higher education. His 37 years of experience at noted universities Brown, Duke, Purdue, Texas A&M, and Kansas culminated in his “dream job” when he became chancellor of Mississippi's flagship university in January 2016. A New Orleans native, Dr. Vitter holds degrees from Notre Dame, Stanford, and Duke. **Chancellor Vitter** can be reached at [chancellor@olemiss.edu](mailto:chancellor@olemiss.edu).

**Jonathan Blake Bostick**

*The University of Mississippi*

**Abstract**

Despite the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* Supreme Court decision outlawing racial segregation of education, a de facto system of socioeconomic educational segregation still exists in America, correlating strongly along racial lines. Low-income minority students are often taught by the least qualified teachers, perpetuating a demographic achievement gap, evidenced through poor rates of literacy and completion. To address the issue, education must be understood as a basic civil right instead of merely a commodity for the privileged. Because research suggests that quality education is a significant determining factor in fulfillment and success in life, the denial of access to quality education is the denial of constitutionally-guaranteed civil rights. For low-income demographics, access to quality public education can break the generational cycle of poverty and enable individuals to fight for additional rights and participate fully in society. Violations of the civil right to education must be confronted, and local, federal, and state governments should take responsibility for guaranteeing the right to education. The lack of equal educational opportunity is evidenced by socioeconomic and racial disparity in the American education system, but understanding education as a civil right continues the legacy of the Civil Rights Movement.

**Quality Education as a Civil Right**

Civil rights means having the same opportunities that other people do...And in today's world, to have real opportunity, you must have a world-class education. If you can ride at the front of the bus, but you cannot read, you are not free. If your schooling limits you to poverty wages, you're not free. If you don't have the skills to make it in a global, knowledge-based economy, you're not—truly—free. (Duncan, 2013)

For students in America born after WWII, the mention of “civil rights” probably conjures up images of Rosa Parks’s refusal to give her bus seat to a white person, James Meredith being escorted onto the University of Mississippi campus by U.S. Marshals as the school’s first African American student, or Martin Luther King Jr.’s “I Have a Dream” speech

on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial during the March on Washington. Defining moments like these of the American Civil Rights Movement during the 1950s and 1960s eventually led to the racial integration of American public life. *Brown v. Board of Education* in 1954, “the fulcrum that changed race relations forever in the U.S.” (Jackson, 2007, p. 29), officially made racial segregation of education illegal, yet it took years for educational integration to become a reality. In fact, “It took many years before a good many school districts in the south even began attempting to dismantle their dual school systems” (Jackson, 2007, p. 28). Even today, though, a de facto system of educational segregation still exists in America, at least along socioeconomic lines, which often correlate strongly along racial lines. Studies on public K-12 education reveal that whiter, higher-income students tend to get the top teacher talent, while the low-income minority students often get the worst teachers (Tilson, 2010). As a result,

statistically speaking, white 8<sup>th</sup> graders perform at the same level as black and Latino 12<sup>th</sup> graders (Tilson, 2010). Furthermore, “Nearly 60 years after *Brown v. Board of Education*, 2 of 5 Black and Latino students are in intensely segregated schools, and both groups attend schools with about twice the poverty concentration of the schools of Whites and Asians” (Orfield, 2014, p. 273). Because of this demographic achievement gap, education is often referred to as “the civil rights issue of our time” (Duncan, 2013). To better understand this critical issue, it is helpful to examine why education should be considered a civil right, what violations of the right to education look like, and the responsibilities of governments in guaranteeing the right to education.

If, as Tilson (2010) believes, quality education is the greatest determining factor in fulfillment and success in life, to deny people access to quality education is to deny those people their constitutionally-guaranteed civil rights. However, the right to education extends beyond the protection of Americans under the United States Constitution. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, adopted by the United Nations in 1948, formally recognized education as a human right, stating “Everyone has the right to education.” It also declares that primary education should be free for all, higher education should be available to all based on merit, and it extols the virtues of education as aiding international goals of freedom and peace (Universal declaration of human rights, 1948). Education should not merely be considered a commodity for the privileged, but a basic right guaranteed to all to ensure they have a genuine opportunity to succeed in life. According to the United Nations

Children's Fund's (UNICEF) 2007 document entitled “A Human Rights-Based Approach to Education for All,” “education is the primary vehicle by which economically and socially marginalized adults and children can lift themselves out of poverty and obtain the means to participate fully in their communities” (p. xii). Indeed, for low-income demographics, access to public education may be the only legitimate chance they have of pursuing a career that can break the generational cycle of poverty. In addition to creating the opportunity for marginalized groups to alleviate poverty, education is “an indispensable means of realizing other rights” (Understanding education as a right, 2013). In other words, education is a sort of prerequisite for individuals to be able to understand and fight for all of their rights. Consistent with this position, the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (1966) states that “education shall enable all persons to participate effectively in a free society, promote understanding, tolerance and friendship among all nations and all racial, ethnic or religious groups.” Thus, education could well be considered the most foundational civil right, since it is only through education that individuals can be equipped to become informed participants in society.

To fully understand education as a civil right, it is beneficial to examine how violations of that right are manifested. According to the Right to Education Project, “Violations of the right to education may occur through direct action of States parties (act of commission) or through their failure to take steps required by law (act of omission)” (Understanding education as a right, 2013). Denial of the right to



education includes: discriminatory laws or de facto educational discrimination; the lack of a transparent and effective educational system; the lack of compulsory, free primary education for all; the failure of intentional steps “towards the progressive realization of secondary, higher and fundamental education;” the prohibition of or lack of regulation of private education; the repression of academic freedom; and politically-motivated closure of educational institutions (General comment no. 13: The right to education, 1999). An obvious historic example of the violation of the right to education is the so-called “separate but equal” system of racial educational segregation that existed in America in the first half of the twentieth century. However, the aforementioned current de facto system of educational discrimination in America is certainly a denial of civil rights to low-income students, who are often minority students. Perhaps the most striking evidence of this troubling problem is the higher mortality rates of lesser educated groups. According to Tilson (2010), the mortality rate for those educated beyond high school is 0.21%; for those who only graduated high school, it is 0.48%; people who drop out of high school have a 0.65% mortality rate. This means that the mortality rate triples for high school dropouts. A lack of education is literally deadly (Tilson, 2010). Thus, denial of education not only violates civil rights; it impedes the most fundamental right of all: the right to life.

What is the role of government in ensuring that citizens are guaranteed the civil right of quality education? UNICEF notes three specific obligations: “To fulfil the right to education by ensuring that

education is available for all children and that positive measures are taken to enable children to benefit from it;” “To respect the right to education by avoiding any action that would serve to prevent children accessing education;” and “To protect the right to education by taking the necessary measures to remove the barriers to education” (A human rights-based approach to education for all, 2007). Essentially, then, states should do everything in their power to ensure that education is accessible, available, and affordable. Accordingly, the United States Department of Education has its own Office for Civil Rights (OCR), whose mission is “to ensure equal access to education and to promote educational excellence throughout the nation through vigorous enforcement of civil rights” (About OCR, 2012). A large part of the OCR’s role is resolving complaints of discrimination. One current example involving potential OCR intervention in educational civil rights is a complaint filed on behalf of students and parents in DeSoto County in north Mississippi on April 28, 2015, alleging DeSoto County School District violated civil rights, discriminating “against Black students on the basis of race through its discipline policies and practices fostering a school-to-prison pipeline and fueling racial disparities” (Butrymowicz, 2015). In accordance with its role as the enforcer of educational civil rights, the OCR will evaluate whether or not the complaint meets its criteria, and then potentially investigate the allegations, which may ultimately mandate a change in district discipline policy (Butrymowicz, 2015). This investigation exemplifies the role the government can and should take to ensure that the civil right of education is guaranteed to all.

Access to quality education is foundational to the success and happiness of individuals as well as the collective flourishing of society. In remarks during his investiture as the 17th chancellor of the University of Mississippi on November 10, 2016, Chancellor Jeffrey Vitter said “There is nothing more important to the future of our society than higher education. It is the great enabler that helps people lift themselves up above their circumstances and disadvantages.” Quoting Nelson Mandela, he expressed his agreement that “education is the most powerful weapon you can use to change the world” (Vitter, 2016). Quality education should not be merely reserved for the privileged, but made available to all demographics. Vitter (2016) also emphasized the inextricable link between quality education and diversity: “I believe that excellence and diversity go hand-in hand. Diversity...makes us stronger as a community.”

While governmental self-interest may contribute to its support for public education, education should be considered a right belonging to citizens who can demand it of the government. According to Supreme Court Justice Earl Warren in the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* decision, “It is doubtful that any child may reasonably be expected to succeed in life if he is denied the opportunity of an education. Such an opportunity, where the state has undertaken to provide it, is a right which must be made available to all on equal terms” (Wilkins, 2005, p. 275). Current socioeconomic and racial disparity in the American education system proves that the struggle for equal educational opportunity is far from over. However, considering education as an intrinsic civil right will connect educational

reformation to the continuing legacy of civil rights champions who have gone before.

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**Abstract**

One way that higher education transforms lives is by fostering the development of cognitive complexity in students. This development is demonstrated in many ways in the classroom, and can be explained using the Perry Scheme of Intellectual and Ethical Development. Cognitive complexity is imperative for the helping professions, and students who develop complexity will be better able to facilitate complex changes in clients. Additionally, this kind of development can result in dramatic changes in the students' own lives, which can lead to transformation at all levels of society.

Rarely do we find men who willingly engage in hard, solid thinking. There is an almost universal quest for easy answers and half-baked solutions. Nothing pains some people more than having to think.

Martin Luther King, Jr., *A Martin Luther King Treasury*, 1964

We are losing the ability to understand anything that's even vaguely complex.

--Chuck Klosterman, *Sex, Drugs, and Cocoa Puffs: A Low Culture Manifesto*, 2014

Higher education transforms lives in too many ways to count. Transformation may occur at the community level through service projects taken on by enthusiastic student volunteers. It may come from new inventions that change the world. It can also happen on an individual level, not only in the lives and communities touched by the fruits of education, but also in the learners themselves. One of the most profound transformations I have witnessed comes from radical changes in students' worldviews as they move from rigid,

binary thinking to a more complex, flexible ability to understand, analyze, and integrate multiple perspectives. Higher education involves a "difficult journey toward more complex forms of thought about the world, one's area of study, and one's self" (Moore, 2002, "Review of Model"). I see the results of this cognitive shift in every aspect of my professional experience: teaching, research, practice, and service. Each aspect involves a different motivator and manifestation of the shift, but each paves the way for transformation.

I teach in the masters of social work program at my institution, where students are learning to provide clinical mental health services. It is common for students to go straight to the worst-case scenario—what do I do if my client is suicidal? What do I do if my client is using drugs? The students who are early in the program want The Right Answer: this is what you do in that situation. They are frustrated by any response that includes "it depends." As students' progress through the program, they become more comfortable with the idea that we do not have a definitive, foolproof intervention to

use with suicidal and/or drug using clients. The Answer is not known. We, as a profession, simply do the best we can to respond to each unique situation with the tools that research and practice wisdom show have the best chance of success. My task is to support and challenge students in all stages of development so that they may move toward comfort and skill in spaces where uncertainty and ambiguity reign.

If the transformation is successfully made, creative solutions become more likely. Social work is a profession grounded in problem-solving. Freed from the rigid application of right and wrong, problem-solving flourishes. I see this growth reflected in the contrasting ways that beginning and advanced students approach case studies. Beginning students will immediately launch into trying to find an answer when presented with a one paragraph client scenario. Advanced students want more information. They have become more adept at negotiating the subtleties of a situation and thus realize that problem-solving is context-specific.

Epistemological theory helps to explain these anecdotal observations. William Perry developed a seminal model of how students develop cognitively as they progress through higher education (Perry, 1970, 1999). In general, the model describes how students move from very basic to more complex thinking. The first two categories of Perry's model, dualism and multiplicity, are most relevant to this paper, as studies show that students rarely move beyond multiplicity before graduation (Granello, 2002; Simmons & Fisher, 2016). According to the model, dualistic students have an absolutist view of knowledge. There are right and wrong answers to all problems, Authority (capitalization in original) is a trusted

source of knowledge, and the role of the instructor is to provide the right answer. In later stages of dualism, students move to a view that the role of the instructor is to show them how to find the right answers (Perry, 1970, 1999). When confronted with disagreement among authorities, students in dualism look to instructors to tell them which is right, and can become frustrated when the answer is not forthcoming.

Multiplicity also has two stages: early and late (Perry, 1970, 1999). Students in early multiplicity come to accept that diversity of opinions can be legitimate, but see the divergence as temporary. They believe that if one tries hard enough, the right answers can be found. Instead of merely having two categories of knowledge, right and wrong, there are now three: right, wrong, and not yet known (Moore, 2001). Instructors should help them find the answers, and if they refuse to name one correct right answer to a dilemma, it is merely because the instructor is using some sort of a technique to help the student learn how to find the right answer.

The transition to late multiplicity involves an essential separation from Authority—students in this position understand that Authority may never find the right answers (Perry, 1970, 1999). The third category of knowledge now includes “we’ll never know for sure;” therefore, how one thinks about something becomes paramount (Moore, 2001, “Multiplicity: Positions 3-4”). Although the instructor can be the source for the process of thinking, she can also be completely discounted (Perry, 1970, 1999). Students in late multiplicity believe that their role is to learn to think for oneself and learn to use supportive evidence.

One multi-layered example of this development happened during a course designed to teach students to be clinical supervisors. Clinical supervision is an interactive, reflective process that promotes the professional development of supervisees, while ensuring that agency needs are met. Over the course of the semester, a student who was already providing supervision in her agency realized that she was providing solutions for her supervisees' problems, rather than helping them learn to find their own solutions. Her understanding of her own role shifted from providing answers (dualism) to helping the students learn to think (multiplicity) as she herself developed along these lines.

Use of the Perry Scheme to study student development has quantified this change. In the field of social work, the field experience, or internship, is the signature pedagogy (CSWE, 2015). During the field experience, students experience a transformation in which they move from trying to figure out The Right Answer for a hypothetical client in a sterile classroom environment to understanding how to use their knowledge and skills to help an actual client find his or her own right answer in the real world. An investigation into the mechanism of this change using the Perry Scheme revealed that at the end of their internship, students are transitioning between early and late multiplicity (Simmons & Fisher, 2016). They are making the critical transition to the ability to trust themselves to think through extremely complex dilemmas with their clients and arrive at solutions. Perry's analysis of the development of cognitive complexity suggests that higher education has transformed them from receptacles of information to adept independent users of that information.

In the field of clinical social work, this transformation in social work students provides the foundation for helping future clients transform their own lives in turn. Facilitating the process of therapy and counseling requires cognitive complexity (see, Kindsvatter & Desmond, 2013). If the clinical social worker is not cognitively complex herself, she will be unable to provide effective services. Critical therapeutic skills include empathy, the ability to maintain a non-judgmental attitude, and the ability to develop complex conceptualizations of clients and their issues. Research has linked cognitive complexity to these essential qualities.

Furthermore, many of the most widely used therapies today help clients to identify, deconstruct, and then reconstruct their ways of knowing. Cognitive therapy, at its most basic, helps clients by identifying harmful automatic thoughts and replacing those thoughts (Beck, 2011). This requires clients to examine and challenge their sources of knowledge—as in multiplicity, they must learn to think for themselves and use supportive evidence to develop their way of thinking. For example, an automatic thought might be, “I am terrible at this job.” The process of cognitive therapy is to identify the thought, examine the evidence for it, then create a new thought based a more positive view of the evidence. Similarly, modalities such as narrative therapy and solution-focused therapy are based on constructivist theories—the client must first question the source of her harmful beliefs, then work to create a more positive story. Because higher education has introduced the therapist to an analogous form of cognitive complexity, she will be adept at helping others negotiate this process.

Cognitively complexity not only opens the door to helping others, but also

creates possibilities for self-transformation. Although I have not personally taught incarcerated students, I am privileged to provide support and service to colleagues who do so. One such course was the Ice House Entrepreneurship Program, taught at a maximum-security prison in our state (Keena & Simmons, 2015). That program produced changes in the worldview of its participants that helped the participants move from dualistic thinking to more flexible ways of viewing their post-release employment options. I hear similar stories of transformation from colleagues who teach in a program called the Prison-to-College-Pipeline Project, which provides courses for college credit at the same maximum-security prison. The men are able to see new possibilities for their lives through the program (Smith, 2015). Indeed, studies show that higher education transforms the lives of people who are incarcerated by reducing recidivism and increasing chances of employment upon release (Davis et al. 2013), results that can be linked to a change in worldview and movement into more complex thinking (Keena & Simmons, 2015).

So often, an apparent lack of options is a barrier to transformation. People who are more cognitively complex are empowered to find or create options because they have moved beyond the confines of binary thinking. Higher education helps facilitate this empowerment in students. Once achieved, the state of cognitive complexity is in itself transformational, enabling students to help transform others, our communities, and the world.

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### **Abstract**

Statistically speaking, I should have become a lot of things I am not. I grew up homeless (low socio-economic status), lived in battered women shelters (witness to domestic abuse), fatherless (single-parent household), was a father at 16 years old (teen pregnancy), attended six different elementary schools in four different states (California, Texas, Ohio, and Tennessee) by the time I was in fifth grade (student mobility), and was the first in my family to graduate from college (first-generation college student). A quick search on research with regards to any one of these demographics or characteristics will yield statistics on who I should have become. However, the aim of my essay is to share how my experiences in higher education truly transformed my life. Through a whole lot of grit, a loving and hardworking mother, caring professors, and sometimes, what I call “tough love”, I was able to overcome such impediments. It is my hope by sharing my story in this essay, that others, with similar backgrounds, will find hope for a better future, either through higher education, or by other means that directly align with their deepest passion and upmost long-term goals. In addition, and perhaps just importantly, I hope by sharing my story that individuals serving in higher education understand the importance of their leadership and how it can affect the students and/or staff in which they lead and serve.

### **Introduction**

As individuals serving in higher education, it is vital to fully understand the implications of our leadership and its impact as it applies to both the students and staff in which we serve. Perhaps most importantly, as it applies to students and staff who have backgrounds and experience much different than our own. As such, we must lead for equity and ensure every student and staff member have what they need to succeed, regardless of their demographics (i.e., ethnicity, gender, age, etc.) or characteristics (i.e., first-generation college student, low socio-economic student, parents’ education, etc.). Leading for equity can be difficult, especially when individuals in leadership roles, rather it be an adjunct instructor, assistant/associate/full/emeritus professor, members of the university leadership team or university president/chancellor, may not

“differentiated leadership<sup>1</sup>.” That is, much like a teacher implements differentiated instruction in a given classroom with their students, we as leaders in higher education, must be able to offer differentiated leadership to the students and staff in which we serve. This type of

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<sup>1</sup> Differentiated leadership, much like differentiated instruction, is the ability to lead in such a way that you meet the needs of every individual you lead, regardless of the differences of each individual under your leadership. Much like students in a classroom, all individuals in an organization vary in culture, socio-economic status, language, gender, motivation, ability/disability, personal interests, background, experiences, and more. As leaders, we must be cognizant of these differences, and lead accordingly. By building relationships and considering the varying needs of the individuals we lead, only then can we tailor and develop personalized leadership that meets the needs of each individual. Thus, leading in such a way that allows each individual to thrive and reach their full potential.

leadership takes an attentive effort in getting to know the individuals we serve, again, rather it be students or faculty members. In doing so, our aim can be to build meaningful and lasting relationships that allow us to have an ongoing positive impact on the individuals we lead as well as help us better understand their background and experiences so that we can ensure students and faculty members reach their full potential. Furthermore, we must be cognizant that, although a strong effort to relate to such individuals is necessary, we must also fully understand that the degree to which we can relate to any given individual will not be the same as experiencing such hardships (or lack thereof) in “their shoes.” For example, my late grandpa Moran served in World War II. In many ways, he never came back from the war. In fact, my grandma Moran used to say that the last time she grandpa was when he left for the war. He was a tank commander and fought in two major campaigns including the Battle of the Bulge and Normandy. Towards the end of the war, in a lesser known battle, a reconnaissance mission in Northern Germany, a tank in his platoon was hit and exploded. He happened to be outside the top of his tank holding binoculars when shrapnel hit him in the back of his head. He vaguely remembers crawling out of the tank and sitting up against the tracks of his M4 Sherman tank. He then pulled out a leather booklet he kept in his uniform chest pocket. On the left side was a picture of my grandpa and grandma, on the right side was a picture of all of their children including my father. Thinking he was going to die, he prayed (and bled) over the leather booklet (we still have the blood stained leather booklet) and lost consciousness. When he awoke in a hospital, he had a metal plate in his head.

He received the Purple Heart and was sent home. He suffered from narrow vision and migraines the rest of his life. When he returned home, he was never the same. What I am getting at here is that, although I might try to conceive what it was like for my grandpa Moran in World War II, the truth is, I probably could never fully understand or relate to what he saw or what he experienced. Thus, we must fully understand this before we “try to relate” to others with different backgrounds and experiences than our own. In fact, as someone who has a background of much hardships, it can almost be offensive when someone intends to fully understand what you have experienced. Much like the case with my grandpa Moran, although his war experience was long before they started diagnosing soldiers with posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), if they had, I could envision him saying to his counselor (that he might meet with after returning from World War II and being diagnosed with PTSD) “you weren’t there, you don’t understand.” To some extent, this is true. However, we must not allow this barrier to divert our efforts to empathize with individuals with experiences and backgrounds much different than ours. It is also worth mentioning here that hardships come in all shapes and sizes. That is, for example, let’s look at socio-economic status (SES). I know individuals who had all the money in the world growing up, and really, all they ever wanted was to feel loved by their parents, and furthermore, they wish that their parents had spent more time with them. In contrast, I know individuals who were extremely poor growing up, but they had all of the love in the world from their parents, and likewise, spent quality time with their parents. It is like that quote by Abigail Van Buren, “If you want your

children to turn out well, spend twice as much time with them, and half as much money.” Unfortunately, we must not stereotype in this process of working with students and faculty members. We must understand that, as shared in this example, students with a higher-SES background does not always mean they had it any better than a student with a low-SES background. This is just one example of many I could provide. Nonetheless, the focus must remain the same. In order to lead for equity in higher education, we must implement differentiated leadership, and we can only do this effectively by getting to know our students and faculty members in such a way that we fully understand their needs and try to empathize with regards to who they are, what their needs are, and how we can meet those needs, with the sole focus of ensuring they have the resources they need to succeed and reach their full potential. In higher education, this is vital. After all, it is the one setting where so many walks of life converge with regards to SES, ethnicity, nationality, gender, and the like. It is a setting in which we can lead for equity, and differentiate our leadership to positively impact the students and staff we work with, in order to positively impact the world. In a world where inequities in wealth distribution, resource allocation, and quality of life are increasing (American Psychological Association, 2017), leaders in higher education can lead in such a way that it fosters a climate and culture amongst students and faculty to lead for equity, essentially making higher education the great equalizer in which lives will surely be transformed.

Below I have provided an image of equality versus equity (See Figure 1). As you read through this article, think about what it means to lead for equity in the higher education setting. That is, in the

case of the figure below, to provide enough crates for each of our students and faculty members to see the game. As you look at the image created by Kuttner (2016), might you reflect on the following...equality is equal (i.e., a crate for all), equal does not always mean fair, and equity is providing what each individual needs (i.e., enough crates to see the game). In addition, might the lower ground be historical oppression, the higher fence be systems of oppression, while the hole in the fence might represent persistence (Kuttner, 2016). As leaders in higher education, it is my contention, that it is our job to lead for equity with a long-term goal of removing the fence for all would be game watchers.



**EQUALITY**



## EQUITY

Figure 1. Equality versus Equity (Kuttner, 2016).

### Statistically Speaking

Since this essay is focused on sharing my story as it relates to my personal experiences in higher education, and furthermore, how higher education transformed my life, it would be a disservice of me not to be transparent about and/or report my own background and experiences. I grew up homeless (low socio-economic status), lived in battered women shelters (witness to domestic abuse), fatherless (single-parent household), was a father at 16 years old (teen pregnancy), attended six different elementary schools in four different states (California, Texas, Ohio, and Tennessee) by the time I was in fifth grade (student mobility), and was the first in my family to graduate from college (first-generation college student). However, through a whole lot of grit, a loving and hardworking mother, caring professors, and sometimes, what I call “tough love”, I

was able to overcome such impediments. Below I have broken down each of the demographics and characteristics<sup>2</sup> of my background as it relates to who and what I should have become, at least, statistically speaking.

**Socio-economic status.** The socio-economic status (SES) of a student, particularly as it applies to higher education is often determined by a students’ parental information such as income levels and level of education (Wyatt & Mattern, 2011). The statistics associated with the SES of students in higher education is staggering. Overall, students with low-SES backgrounds enroll at colleges at a much lower rate (Wyatt & Mattern, 2011). In fact, the United States Department of Education reported that students who came from households that earned \$20,000 or less only accounted for 8.7 percent of the freshmen student body nationally in colleges and universities (Provasnik & Planty, 2008). In addition, students from low-SES backgrounds often need more remedial education than their high-SES peers (Wirt, Choy, Rooney, Provasnik, Sen, & Tobin, 2004). In another article, it was reported that low-SES students were less likely to obtain a bachelor’s degree or higher than students even from middle-SES backgrounds. The percentage further widened in comparison to students from higher-SES backgrounds (“Postsecondary Attainment: Differences

<sup>2</sup> Due to the overwhelming amount of research focused in each demographical area, I will only briefly highlight each for the purposes of this essay, that is, to shine light on these demographics and characteristics, especially as it applies to the higher education setting, and expected outcomes for such individuals, in general terms.

by Socioeconomic Status,” 2015). Additionally, this same article reported that students from low-SES backgrounds are less likely to attend college and/or graduate from college, compared to students from middle-SES and high-SES families.

As it applies to this essay, and perhaps more specifically, leading for equity, it was reported in an article by the American Psychological Association (2017) that the detrimental affects of low-SES are far-reaching and revealed inequities in access to and distribution of resources. In this article, low-SES was associated with lower education, poverty, and poor health. Another article by Morgan, Farkas, Hillemeier and Maczuga (2009) reports that students of low-SES backgrounds develop academic skills slower than students from high-SES groups. Aikens and Barbarin’s (2008) article further supported what we know, that often a child’s SES determines their zip code, which is correlated with the type of education they receive. These children often attend schools that are underresourced, affecting a low-SES child’s education negatively from the start.

***Witness to domestic abuse.*** In an article by the Childhood Domestic Violence Association (2014), it was reported that children who have experienced and/or are from homes of violence are more likely to experience significant psychological problems (both short and long-term), often meet the diagnostic criteria for PTSD (suggesting that the effects on their brains are similar to that of a combat veteran), are more likely to age prematurely (7-10 years), are six times more likely to commit suicide, 50 percent more likely to use drugs and alcohol, 74 percent likely to commit a violent crime, and three times more likely to repeat the cycle in

adulthood. The Child Witness to Violence Project (2017) reports that children who are exposed to domestic violence have a hard time focusing and concentrating in school, are easily distracted, have a hard time establishing good peer relationships, and tend to be more aggressive and fight more often.

***Single-parent household.*** When it comes to single-parent household statistics, they can be troubling, not only to the children living in such settings, but also to our society as a whole. It appears that single motherhood is becoming the new norm across our nation (Dawn, 2017). It is reported that four out of 10 children are born to unwed mothers (Databank Indicator, 2017; Dawn, 2017), and that one in four children under the age of 18 are being raised without a father, and nearly half of them (45%) live below the poverty line (United States Census Bureau, 2014). In an article by the Lino (2013), it is reported that single mothers have little means to contribute to education expenses (I can certainly relate to this one as I had to take out student loans to pay for my undergraduate, graduate, and doctoral degrees). Krein and Beller (1988) reported that the longer a child lives in a single-parent family, the more negative the affect it has on the child with regards to educational attainment. Furthermore, they found that this negative affect is greater for boys than girls (Krein & Beller, 1988). McLanahan and Sandefur (1994), found that children in single-parent households are twice as likely to drop out of high school and twice as likely to become single parents themselves than children who live in a two-parent homes.

***Teen pregnancy.*** According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2016), a total of 249,078 babies were born in 2014 to women who

were aged 15-19 years old, a birth rate of 24.2 per 1,000 women in this age group. In an article by the National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy (2002), it is reported that teen pregnancy often “short circuit the education process and prevent young men and women from preparing themselves for good jobs and becoming established in the labor market” (p. 11). In addition, the article reports that teen parents are less likely to graduate high school and the detrimental effects of teen pregnancy, “when children have children, their opportunities are diminished right from the start, and the future is often one of poverty” (p. 11). In an article by Runzel (2017), it reported that teen fathers are more likely to get involved with criminal activity (i.e., alcohol, drug abuse, and drug dealing), less likely to graduate high school, earn less annually (than men who wait to have children in adulthood), and face a lack of teen programs focused on teenage fathers.

***Student mobility.*** In an article by Sparks (2017), it was reported that student mobility may be a key indicator to identify vulnerable students. In addition, it is reported that student mobility is correlated with lower school engagement, poorer grades in reading and math, and a higher risk of dropping out of high school (Sparks, 2017). A study reported in the article (Sparks, 2015) that was conducted by New York University in 2015, found that the more students moved, the lower they scored on state assessments and on teacher observations of the students’ critical thinking skills. An article by Rumberger (2003) reported the consequences of student mobility as suffering psychologically, socially, and academically. Furthermore, student mobility was found to be associated with

misbehavior and youth violence, as well as hurting students academically (Rumberger, 2003). Studies on students of mobility that take into account background differences have found that “mobility may be more of a symptom than a cause of poor school performance” (Rumberger, 2003, p. 9).

***First generation college student.*** The barrage of problems arising from being a first-generation college student are hardly encapsulated in statistics as so many other factors are often not revealed by the numbers. For example, the lack of support from family members who do not fully understand why you are going to college versus entering the workforce can be a barrier (Gibbons, Rhinehart, & Hardin, 2016). Wyatt and Mattern (2011) reported that students whose parents did not obtain a college degree were less likely to enroll in a postsecondary institution. Of those who do enroll, three out of five will leave college within six years (The Council of Independent Colleges, 2016). In an article by Falcon (2015), it was reported that “first generation college students confront many distinctive challenges including lack of college readiness, financial stability, familial support, and self-esteem” (p. 1).

As you can see, having a background that includes all of the above, including being a student of low-SES, a witness to domestic abuse, growing up in a single-parent household, becoming a teen parent, experiencing high levels of student mobility, and being a first-generation college student were all challenges I had to overcome along the path of my journey. In reviewing the snapshot of research and statistics reported above, one might suspect where I should have ended up or who I might have become. In fact, you might find it somewhat surprising where I

ended up. However, statistics do not account for the spectacular, and remember, people like surprises.

### **People like Surprises**

I was once called into the office in high school by our athletic director, Don Thorp. Coach Thorp is probably one of the most decorated high school baseball coaches in the nation. This was right around the time I had found out that my high school girlfriend was pregnant. Being a three sport star (i.e., football, basketball, & baseball) in high school, he was curious as to my plans to continue playing sports (as I was a junior at the time and just wrapped up football season), and of course, he wanted to give me some words of wisdom. Now, I hardly listened to anyone at that age, but when Coach Thorp called you to the office to speak with you, you sat up straight and listened intently. We talked about a lot of things, about my potential for an athletic scholarship if I was able to improve my grades, about my girlfriend being pregnant, about how life isn't fair, and many other things. But perhaps most importantly, we discussed what I was going to do with my life. I remember not really knowing at the time. In fact, my answer was "I don't know" followed by a lot of silence and Coach Thorp staring at me waiting for more. I did not say "I don't know" because I could not think of anything else to say, but because I really did not know. Up to that point, I do not believe anyone had really asked me that question. College seemed like the natural next step, but that was only because I had begun to receive athletic recruiting letters my sophomore year. Before that, I had honestly never thought about it. However, there was one thing towards the end of our conversation that rang in my head for years after. As we wrapped up the conversation focused on what I wanted to

do with my life, I stood up, shook his hand, and started to walk out, he said, "Denver, you know, people like surprises...surprise us Denver." I am not sure I really grasped what he meant until much later in my life. However, I thought a lot about it, and at some point, it became my motivation. To shed the statistics associated with me, and thrive anyway. One does not have to look far for such stories. There is Ole Miss alum Michael Oher, or Oprah Winfrey, Andy Andrews, and Mine That Bird. The point is, Coach Thorp was right, we all like a good surprise; the underdog winning or a success story no one saw coming. Let's look at how a horse shocked the world on a rainy day in 2009, a day I just so happen to be at the Kentucky Derby, right there at the finish line in the grandstands.

Now, I have often heard folks say they like numbers. I myself am a mixed-methods researcher, and although I enjoy the numbers (i.e., quantitative), I also enjoy the stories that accompany them (i.e., qualitative). That is, statistics are certainly helpful, but they do not account for everything, and they certainly don't always account for the spectacular (i.e., the outliers). I love the quote by Albert Einstein, "Not everything that counts can be counted, and not everything that can be counted counts." For example, my wife and I attended the 2009 Kentucky Derby at Churchill Downs in Louisville, Kentucky. It was a grand race indeed, and certainly one I thoroughly enjoyed as I myself always relish "the spectacular" or a good surprise. As you may know, this was the Kentucky Derby when a horse named Mine That Bird won the Derby. See, what is spectacular about this particular Derby is that, Mine That Bird was a 50-to-1 odds. To put that in layman's terms, the undersized thoroughbred racehorse was not supposed to win the race. Now, the

fact that he did win it, is considered perhaps the most monumental upset in Derby history. At the beginning of the race, it did not look good for Mine That Bird. In fact, he was so far in last place that NBC announcer, Tom Durkin failed to mention him several times as he ran through the line-up of horses and their places (Kentucky Derby, 2009). However, out of nowhere, Mine That Bird ridden by Calvin Borel blew past the group of horses on the inside rail and pulled away to win the race by the longest margin of victory in over 60 years. If you have not seen the race, it is worth taking a look at it. See: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Hv8x9x5A49s> You see, as someone like myself who the statistics were stacked against, I had to learn to ignore them or accept them, and quite frankly, I was not going to accept them. However, I was smart enough to know that I could not do it alone. Just as jockey Calvin Borel knew he needed the expertise of Mine That Bird's trainer Chip Wooley<sup>3</sup> to win the Derby, Mine That Bird needed an exceptional jockey like Borel, someone that, despite the horse being a 50-to-1 odd, still took the time to watch hours of film on him from previous races, believed in him, and fully understood what he needed (i.e., race strategy), our students and

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<sup>3</sup> Calvin Borel was not supposed to ride Mine That Bird in the Derby. He later reported (Soileau, 2009) that he was asked just three weeks before the Derby to ride Mine That Bird. Furthermore, he was the only jockey willing to listen to Mine That Bird's trainer, Chip Wooley. Upon studying film from previous races, along with the trainer, Calvin immediately realized the horse wasn't finishing as Chip had suggested. Furthermore, for the Derby, Chip told Calvin to hold the horse back, and focus on a come from behind win, which is exactly what he did. Again, Calvin was the only jockey Chip approached that was willing to ride Mine That Bird and implement his plan, which gave the horse exactly what it needed to win the race.

faculty need exceptional leaders who believe in them as well, and fully understand their needs, despite the odds (i.e., statistics). That is, the great leaders see greatness in others, regardless of their backgrounds and experiences, and expect great things from them. It is not enough to ignore those backgrounds and experiences, however, it is important to understand them, embrace them, relate to them (as best we can), and help others move forward from them. As leaders in higher education, we must lead in such a way that fully understands the experiences and backgrounds that shape the students and faculty members we lead and work with. In doing so, we must also being cognizant of how we can help such individuals move past possible barriers, while ensuring we provide the necessary resources for them to thrive. I believe if we can lead in this manner, many more surprises will be had, both with our students and staff.

### **Turning Points**

Much like the odds given to Mine That Bird, the statistics associated with my background and experiences are daunting to say the least. In the previous section, I shared the strategies used to help Mine That Bird overcome his odds, as well as events leading up to his victory. In this section, I will report what strategies or events happened along my journey as well as the turning points. Now, I assume the obvious question, for you the reader, may be two-fold; (1) how did I overcome such great odds to go on to obtain my doctorate degree, become a successful teacher and school administrator, and now, professor (and as it should be included, husband and father); and (2) in what ways can you the reader help others overcome such odds (shared in the discussion section). With that in mind, it would be extremely hard



for me to attempt to highlight one exact moment or personal characteristic that contributed to my ability to overcome such odds. Nonetheless, in thinking of one such item or personal characteristic, I tend to think of grit. However, I don't like to rely on grit as I feel it somehow implies I did it on my own, and quite frankly, that is not true for me, nor for anyone. Nevertheless, and perhaps worth mentioning, I do believe some relentless, consistent, persistence never hurt anyone when it came to dream chasing in any way, shape, or form. Again, for this section, I will attempt to highlight a few of the things I believe contributed to the process as a whole, at least for me. In addition, I will attempt to highlight some of the turning points along my journey. That is, stark moments and events throughout my life that contributed to my "overcoming the odds."

**Upbringing.** First and foremost, I must say I learned the importance of hard-work from my mother. My mother worked several jobs to raise my brother and I by herself. At the same time, we had a mother we knew loved us, and her first priority was always our well-being. That alone is a solid foundation for any child regardless of the other factors such as low-SES, student mobility, etc. I knew I had a champion, that is, someone who cared about me, believed in me, and had my well-being at the forefront of their every thought and action. I believe this is vital for any child to thrive, but perhaps more so, for a child with the demographics and characteristics I have highlighted as they relate to myself. Such children may need more, such college students may need more, and such faculty members may need more, as unlike their peers, their needs may be greater due to these demographics and characteristics. Furthermore, my mother was an optimist. During rough

times, I can still hear her singing the words to the song Ooh Child by the band The Five Stairsteps to my brother and I. She always focused on what we had, not on what we did not have. Even when we had so little, she always made it seem like so much. Thus, like her, I am an optimist in all situations, regardless of the odds. That being said, and perhaps worth mentioning here, I am also a realist, making calculated decisions while always being mindful of the long-term implications of such decisions. For example, based on my background, I am sure you could assume some of the friends I ran around with growing up. However, I always knew when to say no, and sadly, some of my childhood friends did not.

**Fatherhood.** Becoming a father at such a young age certainly made me grow up much faster than my peers. In this regard, it was a blessing. That is, for someone like myself who at the time, needed more structure, needed to start focusing on my education, and needed to begin to think more long-term about my goals for myself (and now for my family), it was certainly a blessing in disguise. In some respects, having a child is something you can never fully explain to someone who has never had a child. Essentially, there is a laser pinpoint time (i.e., birth) in your life that everything becomes so much more or less about you, and so much more about your child. This for me allowed me to relentlessly work 40-50 hours a week throughout my undergraduate degree, graduate degree, and doctoral degree programs. Now that my daughter, who attends The Ohio State University and is an Early Childhood Education major, is much older, I have showed her the bus stop on Ohio State's campus in front of the old 24-hour library that I used to exit the bus at each evening after work. I told her I always had a decision to make when I got

off that bus; (1) head directly into the library to study and complete my school work; or (2) walk home and get some much needed sleep. I told her I would think of her and head into the library no matter how tired I was from my shift at work. I know she is grateful for this now, as well as for the father I am and have always been to her. She has always been light years ahead of me with regards to her academics and faith. In fact, she has made the Dean's list every semester of her collegiate career, is on a full academic scholarship, and is a bible study leader for *Real Life*. She spends her spring breaks visiting popular spring break destinations or visiting inner-city Chicago neighborhoods encouraging anyone from college aged students to the elderly to accept God in their life. She is quite truly amazing.

***PreK-12 educational experience.*** It goes without saying that I had great educators and coaches throughout my life and within the PreK-12 educational setting no matter where I was geographically, be it in Ohio, Texas, California, or Tennessee. For the most part, I had teachers who were truly invested in my education and helping me reach my full potential. Likewise, I also had what I would call not-so-great teachers and coaches. For example, upon finding out my high school girlfriend was pregnant, I started going to class, doing my homework, and actually studied and did my homework. Thus, it was no surprise that I made the honor roll shortly thereafter. I was sitting in class one day when I was notified by the school intercom that everyone who made the honor roll was invited to the cafeteria to have donuts. Being one of the first to arrive, I grabbed a donut, a carton of milk, and sat down. As everyone filled into the

cafeteria, our principal profoundly announced to all of the students in the cafeteria "please excuse Denver, he is not used to being at these gatherings" as apparently we were supposed to wait to grab a donut and milk. Of course, I thought to myself, this guy is a real jerk. Furthermore, I thought about the fact that he does not know how to lead a school. However, for me, it was a learning moment – as this is how I have learned to chalk up such moments throughout my life. That is, I learned to never lead a school in such a manner, to never embarrass a student, especially when they are making progress. In addition, this particular school leader is one of the main reasons I study ethics as they apply to school leadership today (Fowler, Edwards, & Hsu, 2017; Posthuma, Fowler, & Tsai, 2016; Fowler & Johnson, 2014). It is my contention that you have to go through life thinking everything that happens, happens for a reason. This particular experience led me to my research agenda, and I happen to enjoy conducting research in this area. Thus, I must see the positive in it. It also made me a better school leader, because I will never forget the way it made me feel. It is like I tell my students who are aspiring school leaders, "I have worked with some of the best school leaders and teachers in the world, and I have worked with some of the worst, but the key is, I learned a great deal from both experiences." Some of the great teachers and coaches I had in my life were individuals such as Mr. Crozier, my 5<sup>th</sup> grade teacher, Mr. Don Thorp, my high school baseball coach, middle school physical education teacher, and later, my high school athletic director, and my high school basketball coach Mr. Rob Smith, who is still coaching basketball today, and so many more. When I think of all the

people who have contributed to my success, I think of the following quote, “It takes a village to raise a child.” That is to say, we are all responsible for each other’s well-being, especially the well-being of children.

**Higher education experience.** Keeping with the theme of this essay, as it applies to the higher education setting, I had some of the best professors at every level of education I received in higher education. There was Dr. Samuel Hodge at The Ohio State University, who always pushed me well beyond what I thought I could accomplish academically during the completion of my undergraduate degree. There was Dr. Bill McGlothlin and Dr. Bevin Shiverdecker at Mount Vernon Nazarene University during the completion of my Masters degree, who inspired me to be a dedicated educator and later, to become a school leader. There was Dr. Lawrence (Larry) Burgess in my Principals license program at Ohio University who took my aspiration to become a school leader, and helped turn it into a reality by preparing me to be the best school leader I could be. There was Dr. Connie Calloway in my superintendent license program (also at Ohio University) who took my ambition to be a superintendent by preparing me to be one. Through all of her stories of leading Detroit City Public Schools, I gained great insight as to what it meant to work in, and around, all of the obstacles that may stand in our way to ensure we always do what is best for each and every child. During my superintendent internship, there was Dr. Thomas Tucker (two-time *National Superintendent of the Year*), Dr. Richard Ross (former state superintendent in the State of Ohio), and Mr. Jack Fette allowing me to learn from them “on the job” as well as what it means to effectively lead a school district. Then there was Dr.

Jerry Johnson and Dr. Gordon Brooks who spent countless hours with me throughout the dissertation process. Not only did their commitment help me in finishing a quality dissertation, it was a great example of how dedicated we should be to our own doctoral students as they navigate the process. Thus, I always aim to pass such dedication on to my doctoral students. During my time as an adjunct instructor at Ohio State, I had the opportunity to work under great leaders such as Dr. Gordon Gee, Dr. Paul Sanders, and many others. Here at The University of Mississippi, I have had the opportunity to work with many great students, faculty members, and leaders – too many to list. It goes without saying that all of these individuals and so many others were certainly motivating factors or influences along my journey, and still are today. However, if there was one turning point, believe it or not, it may have come in the most insensitive of forms. That is, if I had to single it down to one turning point in higher education, it was the “tough love” talk I received from an academic advisor during the completion of my undergraduate degree. Now, before I share this story, unless she was a great actor (and some of us leaders/mentors can be), I believe her real intent was for me to drop out of college right then and there. However, her words did just the opposite, they lit a fire in me. At the time, I was working 40-50 hours a week, I was taking 12-16 credit hours a quarter, and as you can imagine, I hardly slept. At this time in my life, I was regularly getting 5-6 hours of sleep a night. This coupled with my responsibilities as a father were starting to take a toll on my grades. In fact, it landed me on academic probation. Upon receiving this notification, I decided I had better go meet with my academic advisor and figure out what I needed to do in order to get my grade point average (GPA) up

and get into the College of Education, which was the next step for me at that time in my collegiate career. At this meeting, she sat me down, showed me my current GPA, calculated and walked me through what it would take for me to raise it to a 3.0, and politely said, “you know, college isn’t for everybody.” I was shocked by what I had just heard. She followed up by saying, “if you drop out before such and such date, you won’t be charged anything.” I could not believe what I was hearing. Nonetheless, back then I was much more tactful than I am now (not necessarily a good thing). I had the wits about me to do two things; (1) I asked her to go over what I needed to do in great detail (this time I paid attention and even took notes); and (2) I politely told her I needed to think more about rather or not I wanted to drop out of college (knowing I was not going to). After that conversation, I remember driving home and thinking, I am going to make A’s from here on out. Although I did not earn A’s for every course I took after that meeting, I certainly made A’s and B’s with the occasional C, of course I was no longer on academic probation, and yes, I was accepted into the College of Education. Nonetheless, it was the turning point most identifiable to me. It was the turning point for my undergraduate experience, and perhaps, my life, and what would become of me. Although I do not believe her intentions were noble, I took her intentions, whatever they were, and used them as motivation. I have shared this story before, and I am often met with the same response, “not everyone would of reacted the way you did.” In fact, I have had individuals who I have shared this story with tell me they probably would of listened to her. In that respect, I have to thank my mother for raising me to be an optimist and to

question everything. I learned a long time ago not to listen to people who tell you what they think you are capable of. As what they are really telling you is what they believe they are capable of.

Continuing with the higher education setting, it provides an opportunity to connect with students and faculty who may not have the same background and experiences that you have, or may not share the same ethnicity or nationality you have, or may not share the same religious beliefs you have, and this is very much a positive in so many ways. I have always enjoyed making new friends and getting to know people from different backgrounds and cultures. In some respects, I have always been curious in this way. I believe it stems from my student mobility background. That is, I had to learn to make friends and make them quick. But in the same breath, I believe I am naturally curious of all things, not just people and other cultures. Nonetheless, the friends I made in college at all levels of my academic career have taught me quite a bit about life, and myself. That is, I believe I have learned as much from them as they may have learned from me, especially as it relates to different perspectives on all things in this life. This is just another added advantage of serving in the higher education setting, the ability to learn and grow through relationships you build with both students and faculty members, and this is just one more way we can begin to lead for equity, by building lasting and meaningful relationships with our students and faculty members regardless of our roles (or theirs) at the university.

**Gratitude.** I felt it would be a disservice to the reader if I did not include this section. Thus, I wanted to include

gratitude, as I believe it is a large part of what we need to do when we receive help from others. That is, don't forget to say thanks, and certainly "don't forget to send the elevator back down" or "pass it on." I have always been quick to thank the individuals who have helped me along the way and give credit where credit is due. For example, we were back watching a football game at my old high school years ago. My mother was with me and Coach Thorp walked up and was talking with us. After we were finished talking, as he was having health issues at the time, he said he was going to leave and we were saying goodbye. I had already thanked him a million times before, but I thanked him again anyway. Likewise, my mother gave him a big hug, and with tears in her eyes, said, "thank you for all you have done for my boys." I think it was the only time I saw Coach Thorp tear up. What I am getting at here is, we often do not know all of the lives we touch. But it certainly feels good to know when we have made a positive impact. It goes without saying that we do not lead or help others in order to receive a pat on the back or recognition. However, throughout the years, I have found that the timely emails, cards, letters, and phone calls reminding me of how I have touched someone's life is fulfilling and makes ones' spirit feel good. Additionally, it helps refuel the tank when it is low, that is, when we feel like we're not making an impact at all. When the opportunity presents itself (or maybe you need to create the right opportunity), be sure to thank people for their part in your story, and equally important, pass it on, be a part of someone's success story.

### **Serve to Lead**

I have always found the most gratifying and rewarding work to be that of service. I truly believe that leadership starts with

service to others. I have also found, at least in my experience, that it is through service that I found myself, who I wanted to be, and furthermore, my true calling. I share this because I want leaders in higher education to fully understand the excitement of being part of someone's success story, rather it be a student or faculty member. There is little to nothing more rewarding than hearing how you were part of someone's success story. That you had a part in it. That is what it is all about my friends. It is no less the reason why I continue to give back by serving. For example, this past year I served as a Ronald E. McNair Program<sup>4</sup> mentor. Through this service, I had the opportunity to mentor a student through a large-scale research project. I am happy to report that this student has presented this research nationally and published it in a magazine. In addition, this student will present her research internationally and publish it in an international peer-reviewed journal, all before she completes her bachelor's degree. It is the same reason why I volunteered to teach the freshmen common book at The Ohio State University when I was an adjunct instructor there several years ago. It gave me the opportunity to serve in a capacity that was focused on utilizing the book *Outcasts United* (John, 2009) where I had the opportunity to lead students through lectures, workshops, and classroom exercises with one common goal in mind,

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<sup>4</sup> McNair participants are either first-generation college students with financial need, or members of a group that is traditionally underrepresented in graduate education, and have demonstrated strong academic potential. The goal of the McNair Scholars Program is to increase graduate degree awards for students from underrepresented segments of society (Ronald E. McNair, 2017).

to celebrate and embrace our differences rather it be gender, ethnicity, nationality, religious beliefs, etc. It is why I still coach youth football, basketball, baseball, and soccer today – to give back to the community. It is why I am the Public Relations Chair for my Rotary Club. It is why I conduct all those reviews each year for the many professional organizations of which I belong, or why I started The Mississippi Association of Professors of Educational Leadership. It is because quite simply, I believe that “you’re below leadership if you’re above service” and as my mother always said “every hand fits a broom.”

### **Discussion**

As you read through this article, it is my hope that you have begun to think of ways you might lead for equity and utilize differentiated leadership in your current role, wherever and whatever it may be. By discussing my own story, and how my experiences in higher education transformed my own life, it is my hope that you are able to use my story to further support the importance of your leadership in higher education, not only as it applies to students, but also to faculty members. Below I have shared just a few strategies in bullet-point form that you can utilize as you lead for equity, and differentiate your leadership. As you read through them, remember, “action reveals commitment.”

- Seek first to understand, then to be understood – with regards to all students and faculty.
- Support/implement faculty teaching the way students learn.
- Get to know students and faculty members. Build meaningful and lasting relationships so that you

might fully understand their needs, and then aim to meet those needs.

- Create opportunities for social interactions for both students and faculty members.
- Provide collaborative learning opportunities for students and faculty members.
- Support/implement a culturally responsive pedagogy meeting the needs of all students and faculty members.
- Focus on equitable and inclusive practices in all things higher education as it relates to students and staff.

Finally, I thought it would be valuable if I shared a quote from Rev. Dr. Samuel Dewitt (SDP Conference, 2011). Many believe Dr. Dewitt has helped more African-Americans complete their doctoral degree than any other professor. Nonetheless, as you read the quote, we might think of the scratch line as living comfortably, that is, in which an individual has access to all of the resources they need. Furthermore, might we think of a world where inequities in wealth distribution, resources, and quality of life no longer exist. A world where the fence no longer exists and everyone can watch the game, regardless of their backgrounds and experiences, and regardless of their demographics and characteristics.

Now all through my neighborhood, there were other young fellas...they started life

beneath the scratch line, I started life way above the scratch line...now if we want these

bones to live again, those of us who have inherited benefits that we did not earn or

deserve, need to turn around and help those who inherited deficits that they did not earn

or deserve, and help them to rise up to the scratch line, where we are, so that they may

earn and enjoy all of the benefits that we so take for granted.

Rarely do we find men who willingly engage in hard, solid thinking. There is an almost universal quest for easy answers and half-baked solutions. Nothing pains some people more than having to think.

Martin Luther King, Jr., *A Martin Luther King Treasury*, 1964

We are losing the ability to understand anything that's even vaguely complex.

--Chuck Klosterman, *Sex, Drugs, and Cocoa Puffs: A Low Culture Manifesto*, 2014

Higher education transforms lives in too many ways to count. Transformation may occur at the community level through service projects taken on by enthusiastic student volunteers. It may come from new inventions that change the world. It can also happen on an individual level, not only in the lives and communities touched by the fruits of education, but also in the learners themselves. One of the most profound transformations I have witnessed comes from radical changes in students' worldviews as they move from rigid, binary thinking to a more complex, flexible ability to understand, analyze, and integrate multiple perspectives. Higher education involves a "difficult journey

toward more complex forms of thought about the world, one's area of study, and one's self" (Moore, 2002, "Review of Model"). I see the results of this cognitive shift in every aspect of my professional experience: teaching, research, practice, and service. Each aspect involves a different motivator and manifestation of the shift, but each paves the way for transformation.

I teach in the masters of social work program at my institution, where students are learning to provide clinical mental health services. It is common for students to go straight to the worst-case scenario—what do I do if my client is suicidal? What do I do if my client is using drugs? The students who are early in the program want The Right Answer: this is what you do in that situation. They are frustrated by any response that includes "it depends." As students' progress through the program, they become more comfortable with the idea that we do not have a definitive, foolproof intervention to use with suicidal and/or drug using clients. The Answer is not known. We, as a profession, simply do the best we can to respond to each unique situation with the tools that research and practice wisdom show have the best chance of success. My task is to support and challenge students in all stages of development so that they may move toward comfort and skill in spaces where uncertainty and ambiguity reign.

If the transformation is successfully made, creative solutions become more likely. Social work is a profession grounded in problem-solving. Freed from the rigid application of right and wrong, problem-solving flourishes. I see this growth reflected in the contrasting ways that beginning and advanced students approach case studies. Beginning students will immediately launch into

trying to find an answer when presented with a one paragraph client scenario. Advanced students want more information. They have become more adept at negotiating the subtleties of a situation and thus realize that problem-solving is context-specific.

Epistemological theory helps to explain these anecdotal observations. William Perry developed a seminal model of how students develop cognitively as they progress through higher education (Perry, 1970, 1999). In general, the model describes how students move from very basic to more complex thinking. The first two categories of Perry's model, dualism and multiplicity, are most relevant to this paper, as studies show that students rarely move beyond multiplicity before graduation (Granello, 2002; Simmons & Fisher, 2016). According to the model, dualistic students have an absolutist view of knowledge. There are right and wrong answers to all problems, Authority (capitalization in original) is a trusted source of knowledge, and the role of the instructor is to provide the right answer. In later stages of dualism, students move to a view that the role of the instructor is to show them how to find the right answers (Perry, 1970, 1999). When confronted with disagreement among authorities, students in dualism look to instructors to tell them which is right, and can become frustrated when the answer is not forthcoming.

Multiplicity also has two stages: early and late (Perry, 1970, 1999). Students in early multiplicity come to accept that diversity of opinions can be legitimate, but see the divergence as temporary. They believe that if one tries hard enough, the right answers can be found. Instead of merely having two

categories of knowledge, right and wrong, there are now three: right, wrong, and not yet known (Moore, 2001). Instructors should help them find the answers, and if they refuse to name one correct right answer to a dilemma, it is merely because the instructor is using some sort of a technique to help the student learn how to find the right answer.

The transition to late multiplicity involves an essential separation from Authority—students in this position understand that Authority may never find the right answers (Perry, 1970, 1999). The third category of knowledge now includes “we’ll never know for sure;” therefore, how one thinks about something becomes paramount (Moore, 2001, “Multiplicity: Positions 3-4”). Although the instructor can be the source for the process of thinking, she can also be completely discounted (Perry, 1970, 1999). Students in late multiplicity believe that their role is to learn to think for oneself and learn to use supportive evidence.

One multi-layered example of this development happened during a course designed to teach students to be clinical supervisors. Clinical supervision is an interactive, reflective process that promotes the professional development of supervisees, while ensuring that agency needs are met. Over the course of the semester, a student who was already providing supervision in her agency realized that she was providing solutions for her supervisees' problems, rather than helping them learn to find their own solutions. Her understanding of her own role shifted from providing answers (dualism) to helping the students learn to think (multiplicity) as she herself developed along these lines.



Use of the Perry Scheme to study student development has quantified this change. In the field of social work, the field experience, or internship, is the signature pedagogy (CSWE, 2015). During the field experience, students experience a transformation in which they move from trying to figure out The Right Answer for a hypothetical client in a sterile classroom environment to understanding how to use their knowledge and skills to help an actual client find his or her own right answer in the real world. An investigation into the mechanism of this change using the Perry Scheme revealed that at the end of their internship, students are transitioning between early and late multiplicity (Simmons & Fisher, 2016). They are making the critical transition to the ability to trust themselves to think through extremely complex dilemmas with their clients and arrive at solutions. Perry's analysis of the development of cognitive complexity suggests that higher education has transformed them from receptacles of information to adept independent users of that information.

In the field of clinical social work, this transformation in social work students provides the foundation for helping future clients transform their own lives in turn. Facilitating the process of therapy and counseling requires cognitive complexity (see, Kindsvatter & Desmond, 2013). If the clinical social worker is not cognitively complex herself, she will be unable to provide effective services. Critical therapeutic skills include empathy, the ability to maintain a non-judgmental attitude, and the ability to develop complex conceptualizations of clients and their issues. Research has linked cognitive complexity to these essential qualities.

Furthermore, many of the most widely used therapies today help clients to identify, deconstruct, and then reconstruct their ways of knowing. Cognitive therapy, at its most basic, helps clients by identifying harmful automatic thoughts and replacing those thoughts (Beck, 2011). This requires clients to examine and challenge their sources of knowledge—as in multiplicity, they must learn to think for themselves and use supportive evidence to develop their way of thinking. For example, an automatic thought might be, “I am terrible at this job.” The process of cognitive therapy is to identify the thought, examine the evidence for it, then create a new thought based a more positive view of the evidence. Similarly, modalities such as narrative therapy and solution-focused therapy are based on constructivist theories—the client must first question the source of her harmful beliefs, then work to create a more positive story. Because higher education has introduced the therapist to an analogous form of cognitive complexity, she will be adept at helping others negotiate this process.

Cognitively complexity not only opens the door to helping others, but also creates possibilities for self-transformation. Although I have not personally taught incarcerated students, I am privileged to provide support and service to colleagues who do so. One such course was the Ice House Entrepreneurship Program, taught at a maximum-security prison in our state (Keena & Simmons, 2015). That program produced changes in the worldview of its participants that helped the participants move from dualistic thinking to more flexible ways of viewing their post-release employment options. I hear similar stories of transformation from colleagues who teach in a program called the Prison-to-College-Pipeline Project, which provides

courses for college credit at the same maximum-security prison. The men are able to see new possibilities for their lives through the program (Smith, 2015). Indeed, studies show that higher education transforms the lives of people who are incarcerated by reducing recidivism and increasing chances of employment upon release (Davis et al. 2013), results that can be linked to a change in worldview and movement into more complex thinking (Keena & Simmons, 2015).

So often, an apparent lack of options is a barrier to transformation. People who are more cognitively complex are empowered to find or create options because they have moved beyond the confines of binary thinking. Higher education helps facilitate this empowerment in students. Once achieved, the state of cognitive complexity is in itself transformational, enabling students to help transform others, our communities, and the world.

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### **Abstract**

The quality of education is a necessary input in utilizing the “power of higher education to transform lives, communities and the world”, words spoken by Chancellor Dr. Jeffrey Vitter at his inauguration speech at the University of Mississippi. Despite the many advances in technology and teaching methodology, traditional lecture-delivery courses still dominate. Lives, communities and the world truly are transformed as a result of higher education, as indicated by world statistics linking a country’s education quality with international competitiveness. However, this transformation could be even greater if additional effort was put into ‘transforming’ the higher education system, relying on innovative teaching approaches rather than those first used during the birth of Universities themselves. Personalized (or differentiated) learning is the first of fourteen grand challenges for engineers in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, and as such is the key to truly transforming the education system in order to support continued transformation to lives, the community and beyond. This essay discusses in depth the characteristics and necessities of differentiated teaching and learning in contrast to the current state of higher education in STEM settings, and highlights the need for a multi-disciplinary approach to implement this framework on a large scale.

Dr. Jeffrey Vitter’s inauguration as the 17<sup>th</sup> Chancellor of The University of Mississippi on 11<sup>th</sup> November, 2016, provided an opportunity to spread an important message and theme: “the power of higher education to transform lives, communities and the world”. In his inauguration speech, Dr. Vitter described higher education as the “...great enabler that helps people lift themselves above their circumstances and disadvantages” (Vitter, 2016). He also quoted Nelson Mandela’s belief that “education is the most powerful weapon you can use to change the world.”

These inspirational words are certainly true when you consider global economic performance of various countries (The Global Competitiveness Report 2015-2016). Using 2015-2016 data, Switzerland ranked first in the global competitive index (GCI), with the higher education and training pillar ranking at 6.0 out of 7. Singapore ranked second (GCI), with an

education ranking of 5.9. Compare these rankings with Nigeria for example, which was ranked 124 out of 140 (GCI), with an education ranking of 2.8 out of 7.0, or Guinea, with the lowest GCI and an education rank of 2.2. The GCI is based on 12 different pillars or identifiers such as health, financial market performance and technological readiness, but here it is compared with the higher education pillar to demonstrate its strong positive correlation with global performance. There is no question that the power of higher education does indeed transform lives, the community and the world.

Vitter also said at his inauguration (Vitter, 2016): “What does it take...to go from great to greater?”, and it is within this context that I focus on the actual *nature* or *quality* of “the power of higher education” in STEM professions in order to have long-lasting and far-reaching effects within our world. Despite high freshmen retention rates of our students (86.5% based on the 2014 cohort), and overall graduation rates slightly higher than the national average (The University of Mississippi, 2016), I

see the daily struggles of my students learning new content as they ‘master the art’ of their newly chosen profession, and hear about their many struggles in other classes as well. A small part of me is pleased about this, because these struggles enable students to develop grit and determination to overcome their obstacles. But another, much larger part of me is very displeased to see the demoralizing and negative effects of these struggles on students who had left high school with a positive opinion of their capabilities and potential. Several pedagogies practiced in K-12 settings are designed to enhance engagement and understanding through differentiated learning, experiential learning, team work, active learning, and project-based learning amongst others. Although students still face many struggles as they grapple with new concepts, the learning is structured in such a way to give them the best possible opportunities to progress. Why should these pedagogical techniques suddenly no longer be applicable in higher education? Scaffolded instruction should not stop simply because students ‘come of age’ and move to a higher educational institution. Pedagogical techniques are still a necessary requirement in higher education settings, and despite Piaget’s theory that children by age 16 should have mastered formal operational cognitive thinking, studies have shown that over half of students entering higher education are still at concrete operational thinking (Tomlinson-Keasey, 1978). This study, while now dated, still rings true at least anecdotally for many Professors today. Many of us have been – and will continue to be – educated via traditional lecture-style deliveries in higher education, but if the power of higher education can transform lives, communities and the world, imagine the phenomenal transformational power of an excellent education! At the University of Mississippi, we pride ourselves on offering a ‘great education’, but what can we do to make it greater? I take this opportunity to review and compare a) teaching in the higher education sector; b) the shift from simply ‘getting an education’ to ‘getting an excellent education’; and finally c) the interconnectedness of different disciplines necessary to deliver personalized or differentiated learning to all students, to truly

participate in the transformative power of an ‘excellent’ education.

For many of us fortunate to have gained a Bachelor’s Degree or beyond, we will recall the tedious task of sitting through lectures driven entirely by the Professor, while participating in passive learning. We may have experienced a particularly engaging Professor who could keep us fully engrossed for an hour with ‘just words’. This is not necessarily a bad thing ... if you’re a verbal learner who learns well by listening to content and making sense of your notes madly scribbled down in the rush to get the most from the lecture. Too bad for the much larger majority of the class who prefers to be actively participating with the content as they learn. Most of today’s Professors learned via passive learning, and do not see a problem in copying these teaching methods in their own classes. This method after all has been around since Universities first began, in the 11<sup>th</sup> century (Brockliss, 1996). It is well-known by educators in K-12 education settings that passive learning does not provide sufficient engagement and successful learning outcomes for many, although this knowledge has been slow to filter through to higher education. In a 2014 study by Freeman et al (2014), active learning strategies vs lecturing were compared via a meta-analysis of 225 STEM education studies in the literature. It was concluded that examination performance by students taught via active learning methods increased by almost half a standard deviation, meaning that a student could score up to 18% better than other students in the class if they were actively, rather than passively, taught. Additionally it was found that the risk of failure by students taught passively increased 55% compared with the failure risk of students participating in active learning strategies. In the 67 lecturing studies analyzed by Freeman et al (2014), they calculated that over 3,500 students would *not* have failed a STEM-based course, if taught actively. Pardon? How many students might this represent at a national level if all STEM-based courses delivered via traditional means were included? How many newly qualified STEM professionals *might have*

entered the workforce to transform lives, communities and the world?

Thankfully in more recent times, Engineering Education particularly is trending towards a more modern image. There are for example, several conferences specifically aimed at engineering education, such as the American Society for Engineering Education (ASEE) and the First Year Engineering Education (FYEE) conference, both well attended annually. These conferences allow for discussion on many active learning strategies within engineering, most of which have been adapted from K-12 pedagogies. They include experiential learning, project-based or design-based learning (PBL or DBL), peer-mentoring and independent studies of ethical issues, to name a few. Engineering by its very nature is a practical profession, whether it is designing new plants or experimenting with new concepts. Hence it is well-suited to experiential, project-based or design-based learning, where many of the theoretical concepts are more adequately mastered by use of such methods. Farrell & Cavanagh (2014) discussed an experiential learning program devised for students in an introductory engineering course, where they participated in several laboratory trials to characterize biodiesel. Students worked in teams, learned various aspects of biodiesel production, purification and quality control, and were able to apply mathematics, science and engineering principles in their experimental design and analysis. This program was based on a pedagogical framework known as “How People Learn” (HPL), covering four main criteria of knowledge, learner, assessment, and community centeredness. This course addressed outcomes a, b, c, and e from the Accreditation Board for Engineering and Technology (ABET); and pre- and post-assessment tests indicated a highly effective study in achieving the stated learning objectives. Mantri (2014), reported results of a detailed study in India, designed to assess the effectiveness of PBL with large numbers of students in three courses from electronics and communication Engineering. PBL incorporates theoretical input from experiential learning and constructivist theory. Results demonstrated significant improvements in student engagement and knowledge/skill

progression as a result of more interactive pedagogies compared with traditional means. Boylan-Ashraf, Freeman & Shelley (2015) performed a statistical study of structured or scaffolded learning in Introductory Engineering Courses, and found significant advancements in learning of students who participated in the active / student-centered delivery compared with the lecture-based delivery. In the Introduction to Chemical Engineering course (ChE101) at the University of Mississippi, I have implemented a freshman design project where students explore the scale-up opportunities of preparing chocolate bars into a full-scale process. This experiential project, while challenging, showed quantum leaps in learning by many students, and an enhanced confidence and ability in knowledge, as judged by subsequent assessments. All of these examples show high engagement by the students and a depth of learning that is difficult to replicate by passively listening to lectures. While these examples demonstrate we are offering a great education, what can we do to make it greater?

Personalized learning is one of the grand challenges for engineers in the 21<sup>st</sup> century (NAE Grand Challenges for Engineering, 2016) from a technological point of view. As an educational strategy, it is known as differentiated learning or targeted learning, and is essentially a framework within which student need is identified early into a course. Armed with this information, educators carefully choose activities that best meet the needs of their learners to enhance the outcomes of every student. The framework at the K-12 level consists of five principles (Rock, Gregg, Ellis & Gable, 2008; Tomlinson, 1999; Prager, 2013): 1) Understand student need and preferred learning modes; 2) Focus on key concepts and provide multiple approaches to learning; 3) Provide challenging learning experiences within each student’s Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD); 4) Foster collaboration between students and 5) Create independent learners and student ownership of learning. This framework is well-practiced throughout the world in many K-12 settings (eg Valiandes, 2015; Wu, 2013; Bullock, 2016), but is sadly lacking in most higher education settings. I am presently



adapting these principles into this arena, focusing mainly on the later-acquired cognitive thinking appropriate at this level, however the key ingredients are still relevant.

Implementing such a framework into a higher-education class does appear onerous to a Professor, particularly given the academic pressures of research performance in addition to teaching. And granted, this is of genuine concern, however, going from 'great' to 'greater' takes work, dedication, and perhaps short-term modified work priorities in order to successfully implement such an important program. Mantri (2014) also noted the 'non-trivial' nature of suitably training faculty to improve their capabilities within the classroom in delivering student-centered learning, and others also mention time constraints as a barrier to effective implementation (e.g. Lavis et al, 2016). A typical differentiated classroom would start with the Professor collecting initial data on the students to find out their present academic abilities and their preferred modes of learning. 'Teaching content' would be replaced with identifying the main concepts of a topic, and also teaching these concepts in multiple ways. Several of the active learning strategies outlined above (e.g. experiential learning, PBL) would be employed in accordance with the students' preferred learning modes. Depth to this learning would proceed with additional activities designed to extend the students' current understanding to the next level. Clearly students would be at a range of different levels of understanding, and addressing these needs would require provision for beginning, intermediate and advanced tasks. Collaborative tasks would be added to promote further depth to the learning, and provide additional means for students to construct their knowledge from each other. Throughout the concept development, depth of learning, and collaborative tasks, the Professor would check in with the knowledge growth, (i.e. attending to student needs) and review content and support learning as required. Finally, armed with the mastery of concepts and depth of knowledge, students would eventually progress towards taking ownership of their learning and creativity. With this type of

framework, one can see that a great education employing active learning strategies can be made greater by directly attending to student needs and providing support for *all* students in their chosen course of study. If active learning strategies can reduce failure rates (compared with passive learning) by 55%, how much more could be achieved with differentiated learning, where strategies to address personal needs are accomplished?

This question is in-part answered by a small body of differentiated learning studies attempted at the university level, with some excellent results. Chamberlin and Powers (2010) implemented a differentiated curriculum for first year mathematics students in the Rocky Mountain region, USA, in two regional centers. Both institutions ran the course: number and operations, and taught five sections at each college with a total of 224 student participants. One institution served as the control while the other was the treatment group, where differentiated instruction was implemented between one and two times per unit, and overall approximately one-third of the course. 'Differentiated instruction' for this study included an initial gathering of data to assess students' readiness, interests and learning profiles, followed by a range of activities based on their needs. These included tiered activities in class to either improve or extend understanding; whole class discussions; student work groups within class; choice of activities catering for different learning modes; pro-active instructional modification based on students' needs; homework sheets with differentiated tasks; and finally, formative and summative testing. Analysis of the pre- and post-testing from both student groups revealed that the treatment group scored an average 1.7 times higher than they did on the pre-test; while the control group scored only 0.3 times higher. Konstantinou-Katzi, Tsolaki, Meletioui-Mavrotheris, & Koutselini (2013) also created a differentiated program for 27 first year engineering mathematics students. These students had come from diverse secondary-schooling backgrounds, namely from 'science-direction' learning; 'non-science-direction'

learning; and ‘technical-direction’ learning. Consequently, a pre-test of concepts ranging from basic to advanced knowledge for Calculus I revealed a normal distribution with most students scoring a C (66 – 75%). Differentiated instruction was implemented into this class for the semester, using activities ranging from direct instruction; interactive and collaborative learning; revisiting concepts requiring additional attention; teacher intervention; and back-up materials provided for additional individual learning. In all cases, activities were prepared for three levels covering pre-requisite, essential and transformational knowledge and skills. In the post-assessment test, 13 more A-grades and 15 less ‘C-or-below’ grades were recorded, demonstrating improvements by most students as opposed to improvements only from the ‘average student’. These results complement the many studies done on differentiated learning in K-12 settings, and confirm the overall success of utilizing the key differentiation principles in the classroom.

Intentional implementation of personalized learning requires an interconnectedness amongst different disciplines: engineering and computer science; education; behavioral psychology; and neuroscience or brain-based research. Universities are well-positioned to draw these various disciplines together, where the ‘best of the best’ can synergistically come up with a multi-disciplinary solution. A brief review of educational literature in recent years does in fact show evolution of this multi-disciplined approach, and results are fostering a far more targeted approach to enhance learning outcomes of all students. While this has generated much excitement and interest within the respective research areas, there is still work to be done in fully realizing and implementing personalized learning at all educational levels (K-16).

Activation patterns in the brain can be imaged using fMRI, and several studies have reported working memory being served by frontal areas of the brain, specifically the fronto-parietal areas and the basal ganglia (cited in Ischebeck, Zamarian, Egger, Schoke, & Delazer, 2007). However, studies with adults previously

trained in arithmetic operations showed different regions of brain activation, specifically in the left angular gyrus, representing the brain retrieving information from long-term memory rather than from working memory (or short-term memory) (Ischebeck et al, 2007). This shift in brain activity demonstrates to the educator that learning has been successful, and has resulted in long-term knowledge for the individual. Ischebeck et al (2007) presented complex multiplication problems to healthy adults on a repeated basis and novel problems less frequently, and demonstrated that repetition after eight times showed a significant change in brain activation patterns with higher input from the left angular gyrus (linked with long-term memory). This valuable insight contradicts common perceptions in higher education, where a new topic or concept need be taught only once, rapidly disseminated to students, followed immediately by another. The onus on students to continually review the material is vital for the brain to receive the necessary repetition (preferably in different modes) for learning. Ceuvas (2016), a cognitive psychologist, discusses three types of memory storage – episodic, semantic and procedural – identifying episodic memory as that most likely to fade or reduce with time. He cites episodic memory as the form initially established within a classroom, and that in order for students to genuinely learn and gain long-term knowledge, that episodic memory must be converted to procedural memory. This is much like the shift in brain patterns observed from fronto-parietal areas to the angular gyrus. Ceuvas (2016) argues that while higher-order thinking as per Bloom’s taxonomy is paramount in developing challenging processing of thought that can promote procedural memory, practice and reinforcement (and hence repetition) of these processes is required to fully engrain the longer-term memory. Therefore repetition, not to be confused with rote learning of mundane facts, is a necessary key in activating the long-term memory storage of the brain, as identified by the brain imaging described earlier (Ischebeck et al, 2007).

Neurologist and educator Willis (2007) explains the brain functioning using a different analogy. The brain stores information in neurons, and additional knowledge is gained when neurons communicate with each other by forming dendrites. The more skills, information and experience; the more dendrites that form and the larger they become. However, these connections can also decrease if the information is not regularly used or practiced. The more different ways a particular concept is learned by students; the thicker the dendrite branching becomes and hence the greater chance of shifting short-term memory into long-term memory. Additionally, the more engaging ways the brain is stimulated with new concepts; the greater the long-term memory that is built. Building relationship and creating experience for learners with their learning content also assists the brain in building multiple pathways to the same storage centers of information.

The active learning strategies (eg HPL, PBL, scaffolded learning) practiced in some Engineering Education Centers described earlier certainly promote relationship with the content and create experience for the students, and therefore their positive learning outcomes make sense based on the improved multiple pathways within the brain created. However, differentiated learning takes these positive effects further. Using the five differentiation principles enables educators to shape the learning based on learner need and present information in multiple ways (i.e., build the repetition to shift from working- to long-term memory). Depth and higher-order thinking can be added to the learning process to foster long-term memory and capabilities. Collaborative activities enable additional ways of learning the same content, creating a different relationship with the learning material and allowing learners to construct new knowledge from their peers, in

accordance with Vygotsky's constructivist theory. Frequent formative assessment of students to identify their current struggles and subsequently addressing these issues correlates well with brain-based research that identifies repetition and practice for long-term memory to be established. It is also clear that students require different amounts of repetition depending on their prior knowledge, and different types of stimulation depending on their many individual factors, and hence the learning experience becomes individualized or differentiated to cater for each of their needs. The differentiation framework essentially provides an avenue which supports the current findings of brain-based research, and an educator can become highly creative within these boundaries while keeping in mind the implications of student-centered activities on brain activity. With a new generation of students equipped with longer-term knowledge in their chosen profession, imagine the power of utilizing in-depth knowledge to transform the lives of individuals, communities and beyond?

In addition to implementing such techniques into Engineering Education, engineers themselves have an important role to play in the development of personalized education from a technological viewpoint. In a technology-driven era, it is tempting to take up the challenges of automating processes, even education. Personalized learning tools are in fact available in some instances, such as drill-based mathematics or language software programs that adapt to the learner's responses by gradually increasing or decreasing the level of difficulty as required. Several textbooks are being rewritten as interactive online texts with similar capabilities and prompts along the way for students to access when learning new concepts. The challenges for engineers and computer scientists is to produce this type of

learning on a mass-scale – for example, there are few textbooks written for specialized subjects in Chemical engineering designed in this way. But is automation of personalized learning the right way to go? Certainly as a tool within a toolkit of many possible options for differentiated learning, this technique could indeed be useful, but caution is to be practiced in relying too heavily on any one technique. Levinson, Weaver, Garside, McGinn & Norman (2007) investigated computer-aided instruction in medical education, using simulations and multiple view of various anatomical structures. Students with poor spatial ability had a reduced performance of almost 30%, which was quite significant. This result was matched with other studies that also showed, for some students, a significant drop in performance via the use of e-learning of complex structures. Online textbooks, and links to you-tube clips or other multimedia isn't necessarily the answer to higher engagement and long-term knowledge gain, and it is important for the educator to understand and experiment with each class which activities contribute to angular gyrus brain activation. Any potential downside to activities that may not be as effective can be minimized by keeping in mind the need for multiple approaches to learning and the use of multiple stimulations.

To recap, I have described the typical experiences of students in higher STEM education; the significant advancements possible for students with the implementation of differentiated teaching and learning techniques; and finally the role that interdisciplinary research has and can continue to play in the widespread introduction of personalized learning in higher education. Dr. Vitter is right to focus this university on the transformational possibilities available through the power of higher education. While the power of higher education does indeed transform lives,

communities and the world, I argue that the power of an excellent education, uniquely directed to the needs of each learner, is significantly more transformative.

Differentiated learning is a concept that must be embraced by our university in order to make our 'great education even greater'.

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**Abstract**

In this essay I explain the concept of discursive leadership and describe how it is mapped on the leadership practice of Dr. Jeffrey Vitter, Ole Miss Chancellor. I provide multiple examples illustrating instances of this mapping and outline the vocabulary of key terms that my MBA students derived from Chancellor Vitter's letters, speeches, statements, and social media presence. My essay provides a unique contribution to our understanding of discursive leadership practice in the context of higher education.

When in early 2016 I opened my Ole Miss Email Inbox, upon checking an email containing Chancellor Vitter's first letter I expected to read a routine transmission of information about ongoing activities at the University of Mississippi. I was surprised, however, when I discovered that the letter was written in a warm, personalized tone with the intent to initiate a meaningful discourse on a variety of critical - even polarizing - events occurring in the Institution's environment. Soon, the Chancellor's initial discourse evolved into a multitude of statements, tweets, and social media posts creating my eerie feeling that former Duke University President Terry Sanford, an icon of presidential communication in higher education, was reincarnated in today's electronic world.

Chancellor Vitter's communicative leadership resonates well with Fairhurst's (2007) concept of discursive leadership, the process of providing meaning(s) to constituents so that they may make sense of the events reflecting organizational change. This concept, however, has been scarcely addressed in the literature of higher education, as only Gigliotti (2016) has examined it comprehensively, but mostly as a retrospective, post-crisis sense-making process,

and not as an ongoing and prospective sense-giving process practiced by Chancellor Vitter. Therefore, I started contemplating how I could conceptualize Chancellor Vitter's practice of discursive leadership and how I could contextualize it into the Leadership and Ethics course that I teach in the Ole Miss Master of Business Administration (MBA) program.

**Discursive Leadership**

Discursive leadership is a social-influence dialogical process that is grounded in the leader-constituent member flow of meanings (in Greek, *dia* = flow and *logos* = meaning). In the context of higher education, most salient is the discursive leadership role of the chancellor (i.e. the principal, president, or rector). The primary mission of the chancellor as a discursive leader is to influence an inclusive, collaborative and sustained constituent engagement based on shared values such as integrity, civility, and fairness. The discursive leader aspires to inspire constituents' meaningful construction of institutional reality that is commonly unsettled when a change initiative is undertaken and affects all aspects of institutional context. Change initiatives are increasingly pursued in universities to produce a positive institutional

renewal that is imperative for survival in today's environment of higher education. The imperative for change is imposed primarily by a complex web of institutional stakeholders exerting often competing or contradictory demands for increasing efficiency and equitable effectiveness (Minei, 2015; Ruben, De Lisi, & Gigliotti, 2016).

The main outcomes sought out through undertaking a change initiative are sustainable excellence in research, service, and learning. The major challenges to sustaining excellence in today's dynamic context of change are declining levels of private donations and state financing, higher federal supervision, scarcity of affordable student loans, increasing demands for creating and sustaining an inclusive diverse community, development of career-relevant curricula, delivery of online courses, and containing conflicts between faculty members and administration. These challenges that drive the need for change often create a situation that engenders a sense of a loss of shared identity among the institution's constituents. As a response to these situations, discursive leadership is critical for constituents to make sense of the events occurring in the changing environment and of the expected benefits of change (Ruben & Gigliotti, 2016; 2017).

In the discursive leadership process, the leader frames institutional change while exhibiting sensitivity toward constituents because the change process involves both breaking old frames and constructing new frames such that the change initiative's actions may destabilize the identification of institutional community members. When the change-focused sense-giving process of discursive leadership embodies sensitivity towards constituents, they are more likely to reinterpret critical events through a shared, evolving lens of the institutional reality, and respond proactively to the change initiative by revising their shared

identity and by aligning it with the institution's goals. By framing the changing situation with a consideration to constituents' expectations, the discursive leader is likely to effectively mobilize constituents to a collective action that addresses the issues hindering the success of the change initiative (Fairhurst, 2011).

When the leader's considerate sense-giving about the need for a change successfully reframes constituents' expectations, discursive leadership will help them communicate the relevant patterns of meaningful cues signaling the benefits of the change initiatives. This patterning of situational cues not only enhances constituents' understanding of the evolving change, but also nudges them to voice back to the leader their suggestions related to the change initiative. Through this bidirectional discourse, a sense of shared identification in the changing institutional reality evolves as a social process. This social process of collective sense-making of the change initiative is both retrospective in that it engages the community's awareness toward revising the past shared identity and prospective to the extent that it aims to construct the future shared identity (Fairhurst & Connaughton, 2014).

Once the revised constituents' shared identity is stabilized and sustained across various situations experienced as a result of the change initiative, the leader's sense-giving will be aligned with the constituents' sense-making of the change. The alignment is important to reduce gaps in constituents' understanding of how the change initiative and its outcomes will affect their individual roles. Based on this meaningful understanding, constituents will likely reject speculative interpretations of change and preserve continuity of their shared identity. As a result, discursive leadership will evolve into an institution-wide process of constructive reinterpretation of the events occurring in the changing institution's



environment and motivate a concerted collective action supporting the change initiative (Gigliotti, 2016)

The process of understanding change can be accelerated when the leader develops and reiterates an effective sense-giving vocabulary that provides constituents with a sense of orientation while navigating the change process. A positive outcome of the constituents' reliance on the leader's vocabulary as a navigational device during the change process is reduced ambiguity of their initially often unrealistic or conflicting expectations. With more certain expectations about the future that the change is like to bring, constituents will better navigate the new institutional reality and accept the institution's vision (Gigliotti, 2016).

### **Discursive Leadership of Chancellor Vitter**

Dr. Jeffrey Vitter, the Chancellor of the University of Mississippi, has introduced discursive leadership as a novel communicative approach to practicing leadership in the domain of higher education. The warm and personal, yet even and firm tone of his communication-centered leadership approach is focused on framing meanings of ordinary and extraordinary events occurring in the community's environment. Using the principled language of the University's Creed, Mission, and Vision as resources, Chancellor Vitter frames each delicate situation that the institution faces with consideration and sensitivity that connect its community members. His reflexive and fluid discourse invites all constituents to engage in the process of securing community stability as the foundation of the University's betterment. For example, in his November 8, 2016 letter, emailed on the eve of the US Presidential elections, Chancellor Vitter referred to the University's Creed. Arguing that the Creed emphasizes respect for every individual's

viewpoint and that each person's viewpoint is to be accepted with fairness and civility, he reiterated how important mutual respect is to keep the university community safe. By prioritizing the institution's commitment to community safety, Chancellor Vitter responded in a timely, meaningful manner to problems from the broader community that could have been mapped onto the institution's context.

In his discourse, Chancellor Vitter presents each challenging situation that the University of Mississippi faces through the lens of his personal values that resonate with those articulated in the Institution's Creed (i.e. fairness, integrity, and stewardship). In particular, he relates these shared values to critical events that occur in order to uncover how the events arose. For example, when the controversy ascended about the University Halls named after local historical figures (e.g. Lamar, Vardaman, etc.) with connections to slavery, Chancellor Vitter formed a highly competent Chancellor's Advisory Committee on History and Context to contextualize these names as well as scrutinize the lives that they led. By acting impartially and with reference to the shared values on this controversy, Chancellor Vitter exemplified his resolve never to shirk from addressing transparently challenging situations or events occurring in the institution's evolving environment.

Chancellor Vitter initiated also a transparent discourse on the issues of: 1) the termination of playing "Dixie" during University sporting events; 2) the removal of the Mississippi State Flag from the University campus; and 3) a community member's racist reaction to a church shooting in South Carolina. He always makes sure that his discourse on challenging issues is clear and sincere and takes the form of a meaningful dialogue, encouraging that constituents prefer talking *with* one another

rather than *at* one another with their attention focused on the future of the institution. For example, he made sure that the Flagship Forum engendered a community-wide dialogue that mobilized the willpower and enthusiasm of the University of Mississippi's constituents and secured their commitment to foster community growth and aspiration to move the Institution from a great to a greater level of excellence.

By communicating with sincerity and clarity, Chancellor Vitter has inspired the collective efforts to transform the Institution's brand from being a state brand to becoming a national and international brand. In support of these efforts, he advocates the continued use of the *Ole Miss* name for three reasons. First, the name is as an endeared term and revered name to the University's alumni. Second, evidence from a Google search for information on the University reveals that the term "Ole Miss" is used seven times more frequently as a search term than the term, "University of Mississippi." Finally, the name has gained a widespread, favorable national recognition. These are specific reasons why Chancellor Vitter encourages the community members' practice of referring to themselves as "Ole Miss" family members. In the same vein of supporting name redefinition, Chancellor Vitter argues that the name *Rebel* should be used in a redefined manner to connote that Rebels are entrepreneurs and leaders who always challenge the prevailing status quo. His support is grounded in the fact that the university owns both the "Ole Miss" and "Rebel" names, and therefore he suggests that both names should be retained as critical components of the Institution's brand management strategies that promote the University's positive image.

Particularly delicate was Chancellor Vitter's discourse with stakeholders related to the use of symbols on campus. In this discourse, the Chancellor emphasized that the use of

symbols should be determined comprehensively through the avoidance of politics and guidance of experts so that the most appropriate symbols are selected. For example, while the State's flag is no longer flown on the University's campus, Ole Miss recently raised the bicentennial flag to commemorate two-hundred years of Mississippi Statehood. Also, while the University Grays are commemorated in Ventress Hall, they are not contextualized in the University's plaque placed next to the Civil War statue located on campus grounds because the statue had not been erected to commemorate the University Grays but to honor the Lafayette Veterans of the Civil War, thereby advancing the "lost cause" ideology grounded in the beliefs that the war was not begun to address the merits of whether or not the United States should allow slavery, but a matter of state independence.

The discursive leadership of Chancellor Vitter, exemplified in his communicative approach to addressing these above and other emerging challenges is rich in meanings that have the potential of reshaping constituents' identification with the Institution. As the discourse initiated by Chancellor Vitter has evolved into a community-wide bidirectional dialogue conducted through vertical and horizontal exchanges of symbolic meanings, it has become relevant to the way constituents perceive the impact of change on their role identity. The broadened and enriched discourse motivates constituents to innovate their individual roles and to adapt them to fit the changing institutional environment. The constituent role innovation occurs because Chancellor Vitter's discursive leadership informs the process by which constituents can meaningfully link their values, expectations, and aspirations to their innovated roles in the change process.

For the formation of this link, it is not only the context of Chancellor Vitter's

discursive leadership that matters, but also its timing. The interplay of the timing and the context engenders a “sound of silence” whereby what is communicated and what is not communicated equally matter (Reuben & Gigliotti, 2017). To make this sound of silence “heard” in the community, Chancellor Vitter reiterates, as a refrain in all of his communication, the significance of the: 1) Flagship Forum of a hundred-day listening and learning tour that involved interacting with thousands of constituents; 2) Town Hall meetings with constituents that produced hundreds of ideas on how to advance the Institution; and 3) Flagship Constellation Initiative launched to catalyze multidisciplinary research initiatives aimed at uncovering solutions that could transform communities. The focus of all these initiatives is on achieving academic and athletic excellence and creating lively, diverse, healthy, and vibrant communities by relying on constituents, places and resources as the key enablers for change.

Chancellor Vitter’s discursive leadership goes beyond mere conveyance of information because his sense-giving also projects meanings grounded in the Institution’s unifying codes, principles, and symbols, which make the core of the Institution’s identity as shared by constituents. The vocabulary of his mindful framing can be structured into a checklist that could be instrumental during newcomer socialization in explaining local meanings of the key terms relevant to acquiring the context-specific institutional literacy, accelerating their identification with the institution. This literacy is also important for the development of newcomer felt self-accountability for reference to the Institution’s core values (i.e. integrity, civility, fairness) embodied in its Creed. The checklist would likely reduce their role ambiguity because it could help them meaningfully decode the

established Institutional lexicon, phrases, and symbols. The vocabulary for the checklist can be identified from the keywords accentuated in Chancellor Vitter’s letters, blogs, posts, and speeches and interpreted by unpacking how they are meaningfully, coherently, credibly and transparently crafted, framed, problem-focused, and timely incorporated in a caring language of sense-giving that is tailored to engender community engagement by resonating with the University’s mission and values.

The vocabulary of Chancellor Vitter’s sense-giving process is reiterated in his communications to facilitate meaningful interpretation of the change initiative aimed at the transformation of the Institution. The vocabulary symbolically paves the way for new community members to connect Chancellor Vitter’s discourse and the Institution’s mission and values because the vocabulary selects and accentuates meaningful anchors for identification of constituents such that they can rely on these anchors during the change process. Once this connection is established, it is likely that it will transform the newcomers’ mindset and sentiments by nudging them to embrace change with reflection and civility, even when they may question some aspects of the change initiative.

Establishing this connection is particularly critical when the change initiative entails the adoption of novel operational practices such as online delivery, digitization, social-media communication and cloud-based platforms, and novel strategic practices that support the Institution’s Flagship orientation toward honing its competence in data science, big data, data analytics, cyber security, and precision medicine. Chancellor Vitter promotes the adoption of these innovative practices by framing persuasively and knowledgeably their relevance for accomplishing the University’s

vision. His framing nudges all constituents to imagine how the adoption of innovative practices will eventually make the university community a better place for both academic learning and community development.

### **Contextualizing Chancellor Vitter's Discursive Leadership**

As a guest speaker in my MBA class, Chancellor Vitter reiterated a repertoire of his signature themes that he regularly communicates through multiple channels, including emails, blogs and social media outlets. These themes serve as guides for constituents to assign meanings to ambiguous events occurring in the Institution's internal and external environment. With reference to his guest speaking session, I gave an assignment to the MBA students taking my Leadership and Ethics class to trace Chancellor Vitter's signature themes across various media, platforms, and other communication channels and to assess how these themes can be instrumental to the orientation and socialization of international newcomers to the university community.

Specifically, I requested my students to examine these themes and identify a vocabulary of key words that could be assembled as a checklist of symbols, principles, and values. The vocabulary should comprise all of the key words that could be communicated in the orientation sessions and socialization programs organized for the international newcomers, with the purpose that the newcomers could eventually develop appropriate assumptions about their individual and collective roles in the Institution as it undergoes change. The ultimate goal is that the international newcomers meaningfully understand a set of: a) specific expectations of how quality relationships could be formed to fit the institutional culture that support change; and b) meanings underlying the vocabulary of the institution's jargon, analogies, and metaphors as

they are used in framing positive change. Most importantly, the checklist built on the vocabulary derived from Chancellor Vitter's discursive leadership should be instrumental to enacting a climate of understanding between the Institution's incumbent and international newcomer constituents when engaging in the Institution's change initiative.

The vocabulary identified by my students comprised of the following key words: inclusion, diversity, fairness, justice, civility, respect, dignity, integrity, academic honesty, academic freedom, good stewardship of resources, contextualization of UM history, global responsibility, critical thinking, community engagement, internationalization, care, tradition, shared identity, mission and vision, Creed, acceptance, excellence, town hall practice, Flagship Constellations, Flagship Forum, Hotty Toddy, Ole Miss, Rebel, and Land Shark. The checklist built on this vocabulary should not provide mere translations of these terms, but additionally address their underlying meanings in ways that credibly represent the Ole Miss culture and appropriately guide the newcomer towards achieving an operable understanding of the Ole Miss collaborative code of conduct and their expected role behaviors as new community members.

### **Conclusion**

Chancellor Vitter both senses and paces the pulse of Ole Miss through his competent and honest communicative presence on various social media platforms where he listens mindfully and converses openly with the Ole Miss Community members. His ambition is to enact at Ole Miss a thriving world-class institutional climate of inclusion and collaboration in which a greater form of excellence can emerge. His discursive leadership that fosters this ambition involves framing of a positive future by using vocabulary that is

capable of attributing specific meanings to change events occurring in the Institution's environment. Through his sincere, transparent, and positive discourse, Chancellor Vitter proactively prevents constituents' negative attributions of the change initiative that are undertaken.

In this article, I described the inputs of my MBA students, indicating how the texts of Chancellor Vitter's discursive leadership can be used as a source to identify a vocabulary that is useful to guide the socialization of newcomer constituents. For constituents in general, and international newcomers in particular, the checkpoints built on the vocabulary could help each member develop meaningful and positive assumptions about the future course of the Institution. The positive outcome of his discursive leadership is not only a creation of constituents' motivated, inspired, and bold understanding of the Institution's situation and change, but also their active engagement in the collective efforts of realizing the benefits of the change initiatives (Bunch, Fillingim & Blackburn, 2012)

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**Abstract**

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, chronic conditions represent the largest risk to America's health (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2013). Approximately 50% of adults are affected by at least one chronic disease and 25% of adults are affected by more than two (CDC, 2013). As this health crisis expands, those who have the power to create change must utilize it to their highest capacity. While the complexities of the current state of health are challenging, higher education provides a powerful platform wherein those intricacies can be fully examined and resolutions sought through multiple lenses. This essay provides an example of how both individual and collaborative endeavors have been fostered at the University of Mississippi to generate local, national, and global transformations in health.

Chronic health conditions such as diabetes and heart disease have significantly increased in the United States over the past thirty years (Perrin, Bloom, & Gortmaker, 2007). Onset by obesity, these conditions are among the leading cause of mortality and disability around the world (World Health Organization, 2016). The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) identify obesity as a serious health concern (CDC, 2013). Data from the 2011-2014 National Health and Nutrition Examination indicated that the prevalence of obesity in adults was 36% and 17% for youth (Ogden, Carroll, Fryar, & Flegal, 2015). Chronic diseases are the most prevalent health problems for all age groups in the state of Mississippi (Short, 2014). Compounding this health epidemic, those with chronic conditions are the most frequent users of health care, accounting for 81% of all hospital admissions, 91% of all prescriptions filled and 76% of all physician visits (Partnership for Solutions, 2007). Thus,

the vast majority of health care spending — approximately 75% — in the United States is utilized to treat preventable chronic conditions (CDC, 2013). It is estimated that by 2025 nearly half of the population in the United States will be affected by a chronic disease (Partnership for Solutions, 2007).

As the amount of people with chronic health conditions exponentially increases, it is imperative that solutions to counter these preventable diseases are arduously sought. Higher education has the potential to be a far-reaching change agent and plays a vital role in positively transforming the current trajectory of health. To prompt this shift, leaders in higher education with expertise in health must develop and implement effective programs in teaching, research, and service. Thus, creating an ideal springboard that has the capacity to influence a process of 'co-ordinated action' across campuses. Outlined below are ways

in which departments across the University of Mississippi (UM) are harnessing their powers individually and collaboratively to initiate changes in health.

### **Transforming Health Through Teaching**

Accruing knowledge alongside corresponding learning experiences is an essential component to stimulating change. Effective learning experiences occur when a purposeful curriculum is developed and taught for meaning making, transfer, and acquisition. Providing students with opportunities that translate classroom knowledge into their future profession is empowering, as it enables them to have small-scale impacts on the health of individuals, communities, and the world.

To encourage health promotion in public elementary schools, the Department of Teacher Education (TE) offers an endorsement in wellness and physical activity for undergraduate elementary education majors. This endorsement is inclusive of four sequential courses (EDWP 340, EDWP 341, EDWP 342, EDWP 343) that teach students how to integrate essential concepts of wellness and physical activity into all aspects of K-6 learning environments. As part of the coursework, students develop a 10-day unit that integrates all academic subjects as well as health and physical education standards simultaneously. Students then teach the integrated unit in their practicum to attain real-world experience. During Spring, 2017, the first cohort of wellness and physical activity endorsement graduates will implement their 10-day integrated units into elementary classrooms across north Mississippi. This methodology enables pre-service teachers to have a far-reaching impact on the health

of the students they currently teach and the thousands of students they will teach in their future profession.

The Department of Nutrition and Hospitality Management (NHM) houses undergraduate and graduate degrees in Dietetics and Nutrition and in Hospitality Management. In Community Nutrition, NHM 417, students perform a service-learning project and apply their nutrition background to their service-learning sites. They accumulate 15 hours of service with their service-learning partner and present needs assessment findings and a proposed intervention for the population they have been working with. This is presented through a poster session to which the service-learning partners are invited to attend. The goal for this component of the course is to provide students with real-world applications for their nutrition education and create a feeling of connection between the University and the surrounding community.

Within the Meek School of Journalism and New Media, an interdisciplinary health communication course is offered (IMC 585), in which students develop local health promotion campaigns and multimedia features. Additionally, faculty has recently developed a three-course health communication specialization. This 9-hour specialization allows students majoring in journalism and integrated marketing communications to gain expertise in risk and health communication theory, information campaign design, multimedia production, and medical knowledge in an area of interest.

The Department of Health, Exercise Science and Recreation Management's (HERSM) Master of Science in Health Promotion (MSHP)

program, offers a course in health program planning (HP 605). During Fall, 2016, students from this course partnered with the Campus Recreation's Office of Health Promotion to plan and successfully implement three health related programs; World AIDS Day, The Great American Smokeout, and No Shave November. Students conducted needs assessments for all three programs to find out what the student population wanted in regards to venue and materials. No Shave November was the largest of the three events and included Mustache Mondays, a social media campaign to raise awareness of men's health conditions, such as testicular cancer. Other events included Broga (Male Yoga class) and a social media beard competition throughout the month. The month long events ended with the UM staff vs. students Battle of the Beards Basketball game. The game was open to the local and university community. Collaborators for this project included several on-campus departments and programs, two regional non-profit organizations, and Mississippi's State Comprehensive Cancer Control Program. Students from this course were able to utilize weekly material introduced in class and immediately apply it within their programs. They learned proper needs assessment techniques, how to use program-planning models, and finally how to evaluate their self-developed programs.

### **Transforming Health Through Research**

Discovering new information that contributes to generalizable knowledge is a critical component to the advancement of any cause. Departments across UM employ research platforms from different health perspectives everyday. With parallel goals, these research perspectives

seek to improve the current state of health through individual, student-led, and collaborative research agendas.

Research in teacher education has the unique ability to aid in shaping the health of our future generation through the lens of classroom pedagogy. Methodologies should aim to enhance both the academics and health of young children. One age group often overlooked in regards to health research in schools is adolescents. However, research indicates that obesity rates for adolescents have significantly increased from 5% in 1980 to approximately 21% in 2012 (Ogden et al., 2012). Thus, two faculty members in the department of TE created a wellness and writing unit that secondary classroom teachers could utilize to increase academic achievement and overall physical wellness of adolescents (Stapp & Parker, 2015). Research suggests that students in integrated programs demonstrate academic performance equal to, or better than, students in discipline-based programs (Miller, 2011). Teacher education faculty has also examined the impact of physically active units on elementary students' wellness and academic achievement. Through interviews, one study found that second grade students were able to retain and transfer information quicker when they learned academic content through physical activity (Stapp, Chessin, & Deason, 2016). Students in the study also noted that physical activity made the lesson more enjoyable and easier to remember. This research suggests that embedding physical activity into academic content improves cognition and increases healthy habits in young children.

Faculty in the department of NHM have been involved in several research investigations that resulted in benefits to



the local community. One program, *Eating Good...and Moving Like We Should*, is a school-based nutrition and physical activity education program for the Mississippi Delta and north Mississippi regions. Funded by Delta Health Alliance and the W. K. Kellogg Foundation, the project aimed to prevent student obesity and create healthier school environments by aiding schools in the adoption of healthy practices. The program assisted in the delivery of nutrition education, supported the establishment and maintenance of school gardens, and provided increased opportunities for physical activity. Fitness rooms for teachers and staff, gardening for children, and training for teachers on the Mississippi State Department of Education's *Move to Learn* campaign were three supports provided through the grant. In addition, each school had regular visits from a registered dietitian and online access to the UM nutrition clinic for medical nutrition therapy for weight loss, diabetes, and other medical conditions. Key findings showed lower BMIs in six primarily African-American schools, indicating that 27% of the students had some decrease in BMI from 2011 to 2014 (Knight, Cole, Dodd, Oakley, & Aloia, 2015; Knight, Cole, Dodd, & Oakley, 2016).

Nutrition and Hospitality Management faculty have also conducted research to evaluate participation in a corporate wellness programming and investigated the results of participation on risk factors for metabolic syndrome (Roseman, Patrick, & Valliant, 2011; Valliant, Roseman, Patrick, & Wenzel, 2011; Patrick, Valliant, & Roseman, 2011). Three graduate students served as health coaches to employees of all three shifts at a manufacturing plant in Batesville, MS. After completion of a

health screening and needs assessments, students and their faculty mentor developed nutrition and fitness programs for employees. Data from program participants was collected in January 2011 and July 2013 and compared to data from non-participants collected during the same times. Data evaluated included Body Mass Index (BMI), waist circumference (WC), blood glucose (BG), triglycerides (TG), high density lipoprotein cholesterol (HDL), low density lipoprotein (LDL) and blood pressure (BP). Data comparisons resulted in a statistically significant improvement ( $p < 0.001$ ) in BMI, WC, LDL and ( $p < 0.01$ ) in BG, HDL, TG of participants ( $n=86$ ) (individual coaching and group fitness) compared to non-participants ( $n=92$ ) ( $p = 0.26$ ). Further evaluation of participation revealed that those who attended individual coaching sessions more frequently showed the greatest improvement in the analyzed biometrics (correlation 0.88) compared to group fitness participation (0.71). However, those who participated in both showed the greatest improvement and strongest correlation (0.90). Additionally, 71 (83%) of participants reduced their metabolic syndrome risk factors whereas, 9 (10%) of non-participants had a decrease in one or more risk factors for metabolic syndrome.

In the Meek School of Journalism and New Media, faculty has conducted experimental research examining body image in fiction, mortality salience effects, and risk perceptions of pharmaceutical ads. For a recent U.S. Department of Transportation grant, faculty explored health and environmental impacts of U.S. toxic freight spills reflected in media coverage of 5,555 spills over a decade (Swain, 2016). Newspaper coverage of the spills appeared in less than 3% of all coverage. The few spills that did receive

attention were more likely to appear when journalists had more access to authoritative sources, when the perceived risk to citizens was higher, when someone was blamed, or when the spill involved an unusual chemical or situation. However, news coverage was not linked to seriousness or severity of accidents; instead, it was often connected to public fears including perceived industrial risk, potentially fatal outcomes, invisible risks such as a gas leak, and involuntary exposure. Surveys of journalists and transportation officials revealed that media access to spill reports is often extremely limited.

Health Promotion's faculty and students have research interests spanning across various populations and interest areas. Studies on weight management, physical activity, and osteoporosis preventive behaviors are among the department's most recent community health studies. Ford, Haskins, & Nahar (2017) and Ford, Haskins, & Wade (2014) were research projects from collaborative multi-year UM campus weight loss programs focusing on students and employees, respectively. Results from both the 2017 and 2014 research revealed that Motivational Interviewing (MI) and counseling improves adherence to weight loss among college students and employees alike. Nooe, Morgan, Ford and Loprinzi (2016) examined Deep South health care workers, exercise science students, and the general population's perception of The American College of Sports Medicine's (ACSM) Exercise is Medicine (EiM) Initiative. Findings revealed that all subpopulations have low levels of knowledge or were misguided on this important exercise initiative.

Recent research projects from UM's Bone Density Laboratory on risk factors of osteoporosis among African American (Johnson, Ford, Jones, Nahar, & Hallam, 2015) and Asian Indians populations (Nahar et al., 2016) provided valuable osteoporosis related information for local health care practitioners, health educators, and health promotion professionals. Historically, young college age women (African American, Asian, and Indian) were not thought to be at an increased risk for osteoporosis. However, Johnson et al. (2015) found that nearly 40% of the studied population had osteopenic spinal scores. In addition, the limited previous research among African American women noted that when compared to their white counterparts, African American bone density measurements were significantly higher. However, findings from Johnson et al. (2015) did not agree with this previous literature. There was no significant difference between race among college age women. Based on this data and a study by Janz et al. (2015), who recommends more bone density research on young African American women should be conducted, research in the UM Bone Mineral Density laboratory is underway investigating college age African American women to ascertain any biological and genetic differences between African American and Caucasian mother daughter pairs.

**Synergistic research.** Through a collaborative project, the Departments of NHM and TE submitted a proposal to the Mississippi Center for Obesity Research (MCOR) - *Fuel to Learn*. The goal of *Fuel to Learn* is to prevent and reduce rates of childhood obesity in Mississippi by developing a sustainable nutrition

education classroom program for pre-K-6<sup>th</sup> grade using strategic partnerships in education, research, and university athletics. A university-led team was assembled that can provide Mississippi schools with an engaging, culturally sensitive, nutrition education program, and utilize the state's university student athletes to increase reach and effectiveness. Working closely with the UM Center for Health and Sport Performance, the Mississippi Department of Education Office of Healthy Schools, and the MCOR at the University of Mississippi Medical Center, this program will insure that a clear evidence-based message is being sent to Mississippi children and the adults in their sphere.

### **Transforming Health Through Outreach**

In addition to teaching and research, higher education has the unique opportunity to improve its local community and beyond. For this to occur, a University's faculty must align its activities and curricula with community engagement on multiple levels. Through the articulation of purposeful community engagement, individual lives and even entire communities can be positively affected. Even though health concerns are far-reaching, departments at UM have developed proactive projects in Mississippi, across the United States, and beyond to aid in producing change in health.

The Department of TE offers EDWP 341, a wellness integration course for pre-service elementary classroom teachers. Students enrolled in this course engage in service learning that encompasses health education at schools across northwest Mississippi. Each year, students create health-integrated lessons

for National Food Day and teach those self-created lessons in local elementary classrooms. In addition, parents and the community are involved in the National Food Day event by way of assignments sent home that invite families to explore healthy foods throughout their community, including farmer's markets and grocery stores. Furthermore, students participate in the development of school gardens at public schools through a local organization, volunteer for food tastings at schools and are also involved in developing and leading extra curricular clubs and organizations within K-12 schools that focus on promoting and developing healthy lifestyle habits in children.

The Department of NHM has collaborated with the Calhoun County, MS, community to improve produce intake of community members, with the intent to improve health and well-being. A six-week produce intervention program targeted youth and families in Calhoun County. In collaboration with the school district and a local supermarket, with the support of a food and agriculture company, fresh produce was introduced at area elementary schools and then sent home to improve both produce intake and food insecurity of the home. Another example program, funded by a Mississippi foundation and in collaboration with area chambers of commerce, sought to both improve produce intake of households and the economic situation of the county. The 12-week intervention was conducted at two farmer's markets and provided monetary incentives to shop at the markets, as well as nutrition education and cooking demonstrations.

Faculty in the Meek School of Journalism and New Media helped develop the UM's Society and Health

minor, the first UM-UMCC Research Day, and numerous health-related broader impact activities for engineering and pharmacy federal grant proposals. In addition, four adjunct instructors in the Meek School of Journalism and New Media contribute significant time outside the classroom in promoting health through the following regional healthcare organizations: 1. Fundraising volunteer - North Mississippi Healthcare Foundation and the Sanctuary Hospice House in Tupelo 2. Community relations director - North Mississippi State Hospital 3. Public information officer and director of marketing - Baptist Memorial Hospital-DeSoto 4. Executive board member - Hospital Association's American College of Health Care.

In the doctoral level evaluation class (HP 685), students were given the opportunity to participate in community health needs assessments in the Mississippi Delta. These assessments enabled the UM's HP students to participate in an area of Mississippi unlike many areas in our country. Several years ago, an HP faculty member led several study abroad trips to South Africa and Australia, introducing students to an international approach of community health needs. While important for students to participate in study abroad trips, it is also important for students to know that there are significant public health needs less than 60 miles from Oxford, Mississippi. Sarah Ball, Doctoral Candidate in Health Promotion and Behavior stated that "Conducting these community health focus groups opened my eyes to not only the needs of the Mississippi Delta, but helped me focus my dissertation around the impact of volunteerism on community health."

Currently, students have the opportunity to complete internships, research projects, and volunteer in many of the counties where they conducted community health needs assessments.

### Conclusion

Higher education has the distinct power to position itself as a key stakeholder in resolving one of the most pressing issues in our country today. By bringing together multiple disciplines in one geographic location who are working towards congruent goals, there is undeniable potential to have a profound effect on the current trajectory of health. As revealed in this essay, solutions leading to long-term change for the imminent state of health cannot be accomplished without symbiotic efforts. Thus, higher education has a great responsibility in ensuring that their power is capitalized on to aid in reversing the current health epidemic for the betterment of lives, communities, and the world.

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