

Jessie Felton

Old Dominion University

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Professor David Prihoda

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A Leap of Faith in My Academic Journey

One year ago, sitting alone in front of my computer late at night, I stared at my Old Dominion academic portal, my cursor hovering uncertainly over the button that would submit my change of major. At the time, I was majoring in business administration, it was practical and stable, but I couldn't shake the feeling that something wasn't right. I felt disconnected and, honestly, overwhelmed by how long it was going to take to finish the degree. Not to mention the financial pressure that came with it. I had spoke to my advisor the previous week and he suggested a major I hadn't seriously considered before: Leadership. It felt risky and unfamiliar. But in that moment, it also promised a quicker, more affordable path to graduation, and maybe even a better fit for my future. With a deep breath and a single click, everything shifted.

This narrative is about that turning point and what came after. I want to show that sometimes the best decisions are the ones that don't follow the traditional path. Even when they're motivated by practical concerns like time and money, those choices can still lead to the career and life you've always wanted, without completely breaking the bank.

Early Influences and Exploration: Redefining Priorities

When I first started college, I pictured myself following the usual path: get a business degree, land a solid job in a corporate setting, and slowly work my way up. That plan made sense, until it didn't. As time passed, I started thinking more about what I wanted outside of work. I knew I wanted to build a family, to become a mother, and still have a fulfilling career. That realization made me take a hard look at whether my current path could really support both.

That's when the idea of teaching started to catch my interest. It was a career I had considered before, but the more I thought about it, the more it made sense. This would allow me scheduled holidays with my family and the opportunity to foster a lifelong love of learning. I started researching how to get my teaching license after earning my bachelor's degree, and that's when I discovered that switching to a Leadership major

would be the quickest, and most affordable way to get there. At first, it was just a practical decision. But soon I realized that the values behind the Leadership program, guiding others, making thoughtful decisions, creating meaningful change actually aligned really well with who I was becoming.

When I view my story through McAdams' (2001) idea of thematic coherence, a clear pattern shows up: adaptability. I've had to adjust my plans more than once, changing my major, shifting my career goals, but in every case, I was doing it to stay true to what mattered most to me. Being flexible has become one of my biggest strengths. Instead of feeling like I failed to stick to my "original plan," I now see those moments as steps that brought me closer to something better suited to my life and values.

Identifying Challenges: Facing a Crossroads

Even though the switch to Leadership made sense for me, it wasn't an easy road. Not long after I changed majors, I started hearing comments from family and friends that made me question everything. Some of them doubted whether a Leadership degree would hold the same weight as Business Administration, especially in terms of getting a job after graduation. Their comments got in my head and made me second-guess whether I had taken a shortcut that might backfire later.

During that time, my anxiety spiked. I'd lie awake at night, replaying conversations in my head and wondering if I made a mistake. I remember staring up at the ceiling in the dark, asking myself, "Did I give up too much for the sake of saving time and money?" Even something as simple as checking my email started to fill me with dread, like I was bracing myself for bad news or another reason to feel uncertain.

Looking back on that time through the lens of Smith's (2017) idea of narrative identity, I can clearly see this as the beginning of a redemption narrative. According to Smith, a redemption story is one where initial struggles or setbacks lead to positive outcomes or meaningful growth. And that's exactly what happened. The doubts and

insecurities I faced forced me to clarify my reasons for switching majors and to stand by my decision with confidence.

Overcoming and Growing: Clarity Through Experience and Reflection

To deal with the self-doubt and prove to myself that I was on the right path while still pursuing my business administration degree, I threw myself into gaining real experience. One of the most valuable things I did was accept a paid internship as an accounting clerk at Chesapeake Bay Steel. I worked there for two semesters, learning the ins and outs of small business accounting and office life. From invoicing to payroll and everything in between, I was able to see how leadership plays out in a real business setting. It gave me a sense of confidence I hadn't had before, and it confirmed that the skills I was building through my degree were absolutely relevant and useful.

After I realized my degree focus may be shifting, I enrolled in an early education course to test the waters on my interest in teaching. That class changed everything. From the very first week, I found myself genuinely engaged in the material—discussing child development, learning theory, and classroom strategies. It lit a spark in me, one I hadn't felt in a long time. That course helped me realize that teaching wasn't just an idea, it was something I could actually see myself doing and loving.

Another turning point was reading *Drive* by Pink (2009) last semester in one of my leadership classes. The book's focus on motivation and purpose really hit home. Pink talks about how people thrive when they're working toward something meaningful, not just something profitable or practical. That message stuck with me and propelled me forward to finish this degree.

Reflecting on these experiences through Nguyen's (2013) framework, I now understand just how important self-reflection has been in shaping my identity, not just in terms of recognizing what I've done in the past, but in discovering patterns in my motivations, redefining my values, and clarifying the kind of future I want to create.

Nguyen emphasized how the process of assembling a portfolio can help students make sense of experiences they might not have fully understood at the time, and that's exactly what happened for me. By stepping back and looking at my internship, coursework, and career decisions as part of a larger story, I was able to see how my adaptability and drive for balance weren't meaningless, they were the foundation of my personal and professional identity.

Present and Future Identity: Embracing My Path Forward

Today, as I prepare to graduate with a Leadership degree, I can say with full confidence that I made the right decision. What started as a practical move, based on time, money, and a changing vision for my future, has turned into a path that's aligned with my passions and values. I'm no longer just chasing a diploma, I'm building a future that reflects what really matters to me.

My internship at Chesapeake Bay Steel helped me develop practical leadership skills, understand office dynamics, and gain confidence in professional settings. The early education course confirmed my love for teaching, and Drive reinforced my motivation. Together, these experiences have helped me form a strong foundation for what's next.

Looking back now, I realize my story isn't just about what happened; it's about how I've learned and grown from each experience. My path might not look like everyone else's, but it's shaped by adaptability, resilience, and authenticity. And as I move forward, I feel ready to keep choosing what's right for me, even if it means doing things a little differently.

References

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