

## Reflections from an Adult Student

On May 15, 2010, I walked across the stage at Franklin Field at the University of Pennsylvania to receive my diploma from the Dean of the Graduate School of Education. After an intense, exhilarating three-year journey of weekend and summer classes and many nights “burning the midnight oil,” I had earned the degree of Doctor of Education in Educational and Organizational Leadership.

In 2007, after three years as Head Master at Calvert, I realized I had much more to learn in the field, and I sought a formal program to expand my educational knowledge and to push myself intellectually. While the Master of Liberal Arts degree I had received from Johns Hopkins in 1997 was certainly worthwhile, I sought an education-specific course of study. I was attracted by many facets of Penn’s Mid-Career Program in Educational Leadership, specifically its cohort model for working professionals and the four strands of the curriculum: instructional leadership, organizational leadership, public leadership, and evidence-based leadership. The Program was everything I expected—and more. I had a chance to learn from outstanding professors and talented classmates while being able to apply both questions and findings in “real-time” at Calvert. For my dissertation, I conducted a qualitative research study examining the experiences of parents of color. It is entitled *Moving from Diversity to Community: Listening to Parents of Color at Calvert School*. Through surveys, focus groups, and interviews, I was able to gather and analyze hundreds of pages of data, make meaningful connections, and gain important information that will help Calvert improve in a variety of ways.

The purpose of this article, however, is not to provide a summary of my dissertation findings, as interesting as they are. Rather, I seek to share reflections on the experience and the process of being a student again as an adult. The lessons I learned as a student will help me in my role as the academic leader at Calvert; furthermore, I hope that they will be valuable to the Calvert faculty and perhaps to a larger independent school audience. Without further adieu, here are the six main lessons I learned as an adult doctoral student:

### **1. High-quality advising matters!**

I was extremely fortunate to have an exceptional dissertation chair at Penn, Dr. Peter Kuriloff. Peter’s resume and accomplishments are too lengthy to list here, but the very short version is that he is a full professor at the Graduate School of Education, has taught at Penn for 40 years, and also serves as Research Director of the Center for the Study of Boys’ and Girls’ Lives ([www.csdbl.org](http://www.csdbl.org)). He is an expert in my research area, *and he was an excellent advisor*. I stress the advising piece because good teachers are not always good advisors, and vice-versa. Peter happens to be both a master teacher and a superlative advisor. In May 2008, after he agreed to serve as my dissertation chair, he met with me and his three other advisees in the cohort and said, “Here is the timetable for the next 24 months. If you follow this timetable, you will

graduate on time.” Three of the four advisees were, in fact, “hooded” by Peter at the graduation ceremony, and the final advisee should have graduated by the time this article is in print. Peter knew when to encourage, when to cajole, when to hug us, when to chastise us (in a nice way!), when to listen, and when to talk. I had written a senior thesis at Princeton and like to consider myself a reasonably intelligent person, but I had never written a dissertation before, nor had I navigated such a complex process. I honestly believe that I would not have graduated on time without his advising. Here is my point: *if high-quality advising matters to a student in his late 30s, then it sure matters for a 12 or 13 year old!* Calvert students are bright, highly-motivated, and want to achieve and please. However, we must remember that they are still adolescents and by definition “immature” despite their intellectual prowess. They need help beyond traditional classroom instruction. For example, they need regular guidance in how to: stay organized, plan for a long-term assignment, interact and communicate respectfully with peers, navigate sometimes thorny friendship issues, and use emergent technology appropriately and effectively. Please keep in mind that the aforementioned items are just examples from a long docket of pressing issues facing adolescents. Again, high-quality advising matters a great deal regardless of the age or ability of the student.

## **2. The “fast” tortoise wins the race**

The structure of the Penn program requires students to keep up with the highly-accelerated pace: a 36-month doctoral program, with the dissertation research, writing, and approval process concurrent with—not after—years two and three of the course work. How can students work full-time, meet family obligations, and graduate on time? By being a “fast tortoise”! My twist on the famous tortoise and hare story emerged during the dissertation writing process. Starting my writing on Labor Day 2009, my goal was to have a second draft completed for my committee to review by the end of the calendar year. My advisor knew about my ideal timeline, and we agreed that I would send him a chapter, and while he was reviewing it, I would begin writing the next one. By early November, I had begun my final section, the discussion chapter. I wrote to Peter, my advisor, on November 10, “I started my discussion chapter last night and hope to get it done by the end of the month. I am trying to be a fast tortoise if that makes sense!” He wrote back, “I do indeed!” My approach to the writing process throughout last fall was to do a little bit of work at least five days a week. Even a 30-minute session could yield a few paragraphs. I had to chip away at the project, because I would not have the luxury of a semester, month, or even a full week to write. The biggest challenge, however, was that most of the writing was done late at night, after my children had gone to bed and any Calvert work had been finished. (A not-so-healthy intake of diet soda and peanut M&Ms gave me fuel, however!). The bottom line was that by methodically writing an hour or two a night,

and sometimes three hours, I made real progress and was able to send the second draft to my committee on December 22, a week ahead of my original goal. I had been a tortoise, gaining ground in small chunks, but I had done so at a steady, swift pace. Had I been a hare—putting off work until another day, hoping for a big block of time to write—I would still not be done. *The lesson for students approaching a big project is clear: create a reasonable timeline, and then take smaller, regular steps to achieve your goals.*

### **3. Varying teaching techniques benefit students**

To the adult readers of this article, I have an experiment (maybe “challenge” is a better word!) for you: go to an open-to-the-public lecture, perhaps at a local library or university. Listen attentively as long as you can, giving the speaker your full, undivided focus, and then check your watch when you feel the need to get up and move around or to use the restroom. My guess is that, like me, you can probably listen with full attention for 30 to 45 minutes, and then you will start to lose focus, feel the need to stretch your legs, or simply want to interact in a different manner with the instructor and those in the lecture. The most effective professors at Penn did not lecture the whole two to three hour class period. They broke up the session into smaller chunks, with different teaching techniques: lecture, class discussion, small group work, watching multi-media, and the like. In the best classes, we moved around, we listened, we debated, we wrote ideas on chart paper around the room, and we investigated online. If my assumption is correct—that adults can last up to 45 minutes in an alert, fully-focused state, before needing a break—then children cannot last as long. *Young students have the same, if not a greater, need for classes to be broken up into smaller pieces, each with a different modality.* Such an approach will keep students both attentive and productive while tapping into, as Howard Gardner would explain, their “multiple intelligences”: spatial, linguistic, kinesthetic, and interpersonal, to name a few.

### **4. Facilitate, i.e. don’t be a bottleneck**

Almost without exception throughout graduate school, I encountered faculty and staff members who readily and quickly assisted when I needed help. I particularly recall the help of Kyle Stephens in the Office of Regulatory Affairs. He was incredibly helpful as I navigated the complicated (to me) workings of the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at Penn, which ensures that research is being conducted in a safe, ethical manner. I had to submit a significant amount of information online, and given that I had never been through the IRB process before, I really did not know what I was doing. Kyle and I communicated multiple times via phone and e-mail. He simply could not have been more patient or more helpful. Fortunately, I interacted with very few individuals at Penn whom I would describe as “bottlenecks.” However, when a

phone call, e-mail, or piece of classwork was not returned in a timely manner, it was quite frustrating, even for an adult student like myself. *Regardless of our profession or our position in that field of work, we have daily choices to be facilitators or to be bottlenecks. I urge us, obviously, to choose the former path!*

## **5. Surround yourself with smart, able people**

In addition to my first-rate advisor, the two other members of my dissertation committee were fantastic: Dr. Priscilla Sands, Head of Springside School in Philadelphia and herself a graduate of the Mid-Career Program, and Dr. Howard Stevenson, an associate professor and chair of the Applied Psychology and Human Development Division at the Graduate School of Education at Penn. Priscilla lent her wisdom as an experienced Head of school who had also researched similar issues, and Howard, given his role as a prominent researcher in the study of race and independent schools, offered brilliant insights, probing questions, and expert advice. The input of my committee during the dissertation proposal, writing, and revision process was simply invaluable. Their expertise and commentary helped my work evolve and improve over the course of a year's time. Furthermore, one of my fellow advisees, Miss Porter's Head of School Kate Windsor, suggested multiple books to review and provided abundant moral support. By surrounding myself with smart, able people who were experts in their field, my final result was better. *In our daily work—again, regardless of profession—I suggest that we search for mentors, intelligent co-workers, and experienced colleagues who can help us grow and improve. In a similar fashion, we need to help our students understand both the value of asking for help as well as how to do it. Often they are intimidated by adults and concerned about seeking academic advice from peers—we need to help them learn to do both.*

## **6. Step up when a student needs help**

In early September 2008, I submitted my comprehensive exam, which was a 15-page essay. In mid-November, we were told that the results would be mailed home by the end of the month; we would either receive word that we “passed” or had to “remediate,” which was a kind way of saying we had failed and needed to make significant revisions. I had spent a lot of time writing the essay, and I expected to pass this important assignment. When I opened the Penn envelope and saw “remediate” in the opening sentence, I was crushed. It was the clearly low point of my three years at Penn. Rather than chalking up the “pass” and moving on, I was faced with the major task of revising the essay and then anxiously awaiting the results a second time. In dire need of help, I turned to the Program Director, Dr. Michael Johanek. Mike read my essay, made lengthy written commentary, met with me, and calmly and clearly walked me through how I could and should make the necessary revisions. I soaked in Mike's advice and then fell back on the corrections process that had been ingrained in

me starting in Seventh Age at Calvert with Mrs. Licht. I resubmitted my essay in late January, and by mid-March, I received the great news that I had finally passed the exam. On graduation day over a year later, each graduate had a chance to say a few words at a reception, and I made a point of thanking Mike for helping me when I truly needed assistance. *Throughout the course of a school year, students across the ability range may need extra support, and schools must be prepared to “step up” to help them. In academic work this means we help students turn “failures” into important, valuable lessons. The challenge also could be medical or family-related; we will do our students a great service by helping them meet whatever arises.*

In conclusion, I would be remiss if I did not thank my wonderful wife, Eva, for all of her support during my years at Penn. I certainly would not have graduated without her taking care of our three children while I was at class on weekends and in the summer! In addition, my administrative colleagues at Calvert always encouraged me and did an excellent job watching over the School while I was in Philadelphia one Friday a month. Accomplishing a major task is always a team effort. My advisor, dissertation committee, spouse, and Calvert colleagues were superb teammates, and I am deeply appreciative for their care, love, and support.