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Final Reflection

Theory of Reasoned Action in the Decision-Making Process

Everyone knows that college is a time to figure yourself out, explore the world away from your family and friends from back home, and hopefully come out after four (or more) years with the career of your dreams. At least that’s what I thought it would be. For the most part, the first two clauses are true—you do get to learn your boundaries, and the kinds of people you like and dislike, along with a slew of other self-discoveries. You also, for the most part, get to exist on a day-to-day basis away from your parents, who prior to college made most decisions for you throughout life, assuming that one had active parents growing up. However, that last clause can be challenged the most because so often, students find themselves lost and unsure of which career path to take. As a part of graduating with university honors distinction, we must apply an academic theory to our college experience narratives to better illustrate the meaning. In my case, because it is commonplace for people, myself included, to matriculate through college blindly following someone else’s path, I will talk about how the Theory of Reasoned Action, along with my selected artifacts representative of things that define my college experience, played a role in my own development as I approach graduation. I will also use some interpersonal and intercultural communication theories to explain how I became the person that I am and how those traits have impacted my life and will impact my future.

To begin, the Theory of Reasoned Action is a model that “assumes people rationally calculate the costs and benefits of engaging in a particular behavior under consideration. The
hallmark of the model is its emphasis on conscious deliberation” (Perloff 2003). Another working definition for this theory is “behavior predicted by behavioral intention, which in turn is predicted by the individual’s attitude and subjective norm. Attitude is a person’s positive or negative feelings toward the behavior, and subjective norm is a person’s perceived social pressures to think or behave in a certain way” (Dominic 2003). Essentially, this theory explains how attitudes on subjects are formed by external influences, which that attitude is reflected in the person’s behavior. It also helps explain how people make decisions. I will use TRA to demonstrate how all of my life decisions have been made thus far, and how I will use it to choose my future career. For the sake of this reflection, the ‘particular behavior’ from the first definition I will be constantly referring to is a “top tier career”, the ‘subjective norm’ is my dad and other people in my immediate surroundings opinions about what career they think I should be pursuing, and the ‘conscious deliberation’ is done by me, the student, who has a million and one different ideals of what I should be aiming for after graduation thrown at me. I, for one, have major birdies in my ear: my parents, but my dad in particular. Of course they want the best for me, but they make it difficult for me to feel 100 percent comfortable with my ideas when they constantly scrutinize them for not being prestigious or ambitious enough. My dad’s satisfaction with my career choice, the subjective norm, is a huge factor I take into consideration when I’m weighing out my life choices. It’s difficult for me to not think about his approval when I’m considering which jobs to apply for, or when I’m deciding whether or not I am going to attend graduate school. I will use the NY Times Best Selling novel, Things Fall Apart, along with collectivistic culture theories, later on in this reflection to explain why my parents have such a
heavy influence on my choices. But first I will talk about the struggle to arrive upon a major that myself and other college students faced.

When you enter college, extreme emphasis is placed on choosing a major. According to everyone I know who has lived the horror story personally, arriving at a university without having decided on a major is tricky, because for those students, advising can be a nightmare. It is easier to get thrown by the wayside by your advisors when it comes time for class registration, so it is imperative students know the requirements of their track, or at least a general idea, so that they can be on schedule to graduate. However, some students have still faced obstacles in completing their desired major. In various studies, researchers found there has been an epidemic of academic advisors steering their students away from the majors they initially chose, and towards majors the advisors felt were more suitable for the student’s demonstrated ability. This process is called “cooling out”, because it essentially cools the student’s desire to attain their career goals over time with constant wheedling (Bahr 2008). Typically carried out in community colleges, but still a potential threat at four-year universities as well, this process consists of advisors “gradually disengaging” their students by providing them with alternative plans that they perceive will be easier for them to complete than their own desire. Cooling it disproportionately happens to black students more than any other racial group due to biases and stereotypes that suggest blacks aren’t as high performing or mentally capable (Bahr 2008).

Luckily for me, I came into UNC Charlotte as a communication major, and I stuck with it. I knew my entire life that I was good at talking, relating with people, writing eloquently, and public speaking. All those talents pointed me immediately in the direction of communication. When it came to deciding on my concentration within the major, I looked at all the options and
decided that PR was the most corporate of them all. That, coupled with my positive attitude formed by the subjective norm’s influence on my thoughts, strengthened my goal to make a lot of money and propelled PR to my number one pursuit. I also added journalism as my minor because as I matriculated through my PR courses, the importance of good writing was thrust at us repeatedly to the point where I figured having it under my belt could only be a beneficial addition. What I’m finding as I get closer to graduation and face the decision of what career to pursue, is I’m not “in love” with public relations as a field. At least that’s what I think, although I cannot wholeheartedly make that assertion given the fact that I have not had any experience in an exclusively PR environment. Each professional internship I’ve held in the past has possessed some element of PR, whether it be web copy writing, editorial work, event planning, promotional work, community relations, or brand development. However, I have not had that exclusive PR agency experience that made me love my major, which is so important in falling in love with my future career.

Because of my quick-witted personality, fast-paced lifestyle, and many other facets of my personality, my friends and I have concluded that I belong in a corporate environment. I can almost picture myself attending executive meetings, networking with key stakeholders over lunch and at evening events, interacting with the media pretty heavily; essentially living the PR lifestyle that Sex in the City so heavily glamorized. I find this idea so enticing because it capitalizes on my strengths and makes me feel excited about possibly falling in love with my future job. Now that graduation is drawing near, I’m especially apprehensive about landing a job that I won’t dread going to everyday. Having this vision of PR in my mind gives me hope that my fate won’t be reduced to “working to live”, instead of “living to work”. Although these
points were somewhat the foundation of how I made my decision to study PR, my Principles of PR professor, Dr. Alan Freitag, did make it clear to his students that the glamorous lifestyle isn’t all that PR is composed of, and that we should also be prepared for the gritty, not so fun work, such as researching and writing.

So, what’s this obsession with all things corporate? Well, for most of us, corporate is synonymous with money. In my Principles of PR class, we learned of the different sectors of PR: non-profit, government, corporate, and agency. As it can be assumed, corporate, especially in Charlotte, means Fortune 500. Of course I knew that an entry level job in communication as a whole does not make a ton of money, but from research and logical reasoning, I predicted that as a starting PR professional, I could earn upwards of a $40,000 salary if I put my foot in the right door. Though it’s a far cry from the six figures that my dad made very clear he envisions me making, it’s a humble start for a young, single woman. I know money should never be a controlling factor when it comes to deciding upon a career (at least that’s what everyone urges you not to do), but for me, my culture expects that I not only make money for myself and my future kids, but that I send money back home to Nigeria to assist my extended family with their lives as well. Because I was raised in a collectivist culture, family and community come before your own needs most of the time. My dad, who is significantly more vocal with his expectations, and is more prideful, expects that my siblings and I will take care of my mother and him in their old age, as well as relatives back home. Having that weighted responsibility, the subjective norm, on my mind makes me choose every life choice carefully so as not to disturb that expectation. In an article written by Marcia Carteret, she discusses how collectivist cultures place extreme emphasis on immediate and extended families and tribes. When describing the contrast between
individualists and collectivists, she states, “The term familism is often used to describe the dominant social pattern where decision-making processes emphasize the needs of the family/group first, and the concept of having a ‘private life’ may not even exist” (Carteret). This definition confirms my everyday struggle of trying to balance my American ideal of independence with my Nigerian culture that always reminds me to think of my family first in every decision I make.

So fast forward to now, three months before I graduate in May, and I am faced with the decision of what I really want to do with my communication studies degree in PR and minor in journalism. The flip side to not knowing what you want to major in is coming in with a major that you either chose because you’re passionate about it (best case scenario), or because your parents or guardians told you that’s the best route to take (worst case). For some, it may be a mix of the two. Although this is not the dichotomy always presented, this is a common dilemma that students run into often. According to a 2015 Student Loan Survey, almost half (44%) of the 1,000 parents interviewed stated that they would only pay for their child’s education if they pursued a high demand field (Johnson). This is said to be due to the skyrocketing levels of student debt and unemployment or underemployment of college grads. Another way students and parents try minimizing unemployment risk is by adding majors and minors to increase their well-roundedness. According to the Education Department, students graduating with double majors rose 70 percent from 2001 to 2011 (Simon). This means that students are fighting to increase their marketability and versatility and set themselves apart from the crowd.

However, it is also not an uncommon theme for students to choose their majors based on what authoritative adults in their lives think they should do, the subjective norm, which is a
combination of both of the above scenarios. As a result of this gentle probing by society to pursue certain degrees, 80 percent of college students end up changing their majors at least once, if not several times throughout their time at a college or university (Ramos). Penn State conducted a study that found 80 percent of freshman, both declared and undeclared, express uncertainty with their choice (Simon). A lot of students carry the pressure of being the first person in their family to attend college, a lot have helicopter parents who have always been extremely dominant in their lives, and some students just get caught up in the millennial rat race of always having to have the “best” internship, the highest GPA, and the most extra-curricular activities. According to studies conducted by the American Psychological Association, millennials are more stressed than previous generations with 50 percent reporting that they were up all night plagued with worries (Donovan).

Due to how millennials were raised, we are used to having almost instantaneous feedback that measures our performance and either encourages or discourages us from continuing on with whatever it is we are doing. Without that immediate affirmation, our attitudes can become negative, and lessons our convictions that we are doing the right thing. Regarding millennials, Lauren Stiller Rikleen writes in USA Today, ”They had a voice in family dynamics, and in school activities …They've gotten a report card in every phase of their life. In school and extracurricular activities, they were always encouraged to do more, and they received constant feedback on how they were doing” (Donovan). Because of that, we are conditioned to be the best in all spheres so that we can receive praise and affirmation in order to feel conviction in our chosen paths. This process isn’t always beneficial or healthy for us, considering the fact that as previously stated, many millennials (aged 18-33) have restless nights, and women especially are
burnt out from such vigorous work by the age of 30 (Donovan). This brings me back to the issue of millennials’ parents being a part of the rat race that produces overly-exerted students. A study by the Center for College Affordability predicts that from 2010 to 2020, there will be 19 million college grads hitting the market, with only 7 million jobs available (Huffington). This is likely to produce increased stress for millennials. According to TIME, the reason that millennials are so self-centered and set on being the “best” is because of helicopter parents that hold their kids’ hands throughout primary school, secondary school, college, and even to the front steps of their first jobs. Gillespie from TIME states,

“More than two-thirds of us think there ought to be a law that kids as old as 9 should be supervised while playing at a public park...We think that our precious bundles of joy should be 12 before they can wait alone in a car for five minutes on a cool day or walk to school without an adult, and that they should be 13 before they can be trusted to stay home alone. You’d think that kids raised on Baby Einstein DVDs should be a little more advanced than that.”

His statement indicates that although 71 percent of adults think 18-29 year olds are selfish, and 65 percent think they are entitled (Gillespie), parents, society, and lawmakers are the ones creating this problem by coddling children past the ages that are acceptable. Although I do not have helicopter parents who hover over my every move, I do have older siblings who were never as academically gifted as I was growing up. As I became school aged and began to show leadership and academic promise, my parents put more stock in my performance than theirs, and inadvertantly put an enormous weight on my shoulders to be their “pride and joy” and to not
mess up. My two older siblings, Anita (26), and Chris (23), both took unconventional paths out of high school.

Anita was a slightly below average student in high school, so when it came time to attend college, she didn’t have many options. She was accepted into North Carolina Central University under a bridge program, which meant that those students had to spend the summer before entering college in a program that prepared them to assimilate into a challenging college environment. Despite the circumstance she was admitted under, Anita still got in with the wrong crowd, slacked off and found herself flunking out of school by her third year. Eventually, due to the coercion of my parents, she dropped out from NCCU, took a semester off to focus on herself and get her mind in the right place, and figure out her next steps in life. She then enrolled at a small private HBCU, Shaw University, in downtown Raleigh so that she could commute every day and live at home. My brother showed even less of an investment in school from an early age. My parents put him in learning centers for tutoring as early as the sixth grade. Each year, he barely scraped by to pass his classes, all the way up until graduating high school by the skin of his teeth. After that, since he hadn’t taken his SAT or ACT and didn’t have a high enough GPA to attend a university he, along with my parents, decided that he should study in boarding school in Nigeria for a couple of years to learn discipline and leverage his chances of getting into a university upon returning to the states. Despite being thousands of miles away across the big pond, Chris still found a way to slack off and not do his work. After spending almost two years in that boarding school, and an obscene amount of my parents’ money, my brother returned to the States completely unchanged. When he got back, my parents desperately urged him to enroll in community college immediately so that he could begin his path of being a radiologist, which
is what he said he wanted to pursue. It has now been three years since his return and he has not yet earned a degree, and has nothing to show for these years.

To better contextualize the dynamic of my home growing up, I think it would be best to compare it to the novel. Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*, a novel I read in high school which resonated with me due to the fact that the main character was Okonkwo, an Igbo (Nigerian) man who has multiple wives and children, and is extraordinarily stubborn. Out of the tens of kids he has by multiple women, his favorite is his daughter, Ezinma. He wishes she were his eldest son because she possesses all the traits that are typical of a boy in that culture. She’s outspoken, assertive, aggressive, loves to help him out around the farm, and is sociable during family gatherings. His son Nwoye, on the other hand, is soft spoken, timid, lazy, and all the things that a hardened man such as Okonkwo despises. Okonkwo brought himself up from nothing to being a chief in his village and a highly respected leader. He refused to do anything that he felt would spoil his reputation. Because of that determination to remain at the top of the social ladder and maintain the village’s reverence of him, he continued being hard on his son and never accepted him for who he was. As the plot continues to develop, he eventually gets exiled from his village due to a glitch causing his gun to discharge at a funeral, killing an innocent bystander. While he was away on exile, his village was partially converted by missionaries, which infuriated him. He found out that his son, Nwoye, was one of the people converted and he beat him until he ran away. Eventually the pressure for his village to convert to Christianity outweighed the amount of people who wanted to remain faithful to their original religion. Okonkwo’s stubborn pride was so much that he eventually committed suicide rather than convert and succumb to pressure.
Although that story is extreme, it easily illustrates the flawed mindset of a typical traditional Igbo man. My dad was raised to be a stern man who has a subservient wife and kids that do everything he tells them to do without ever challenging it. Although coming to the United States did change my dad so that he isn’t as strict as a typical “bush” or village man, he still holds the mindset that his children are an exact reflection of his status in society. Because my dad is highly respected within the Nigerian community in Raleigh, he feels great pressure to have kids that are extremely successful in order to have things to boast about and maintain his reputation as a chief. This obsession with maintaining a family brand has been a pitfall in my dad’s mental health in some ways over the years. My older brother, his only son, is very similar to the main character, Okonkwo’s son. They both are very lazy, unambitious, and disappointing to their strong fathers. In a like comparison to the book, I am representative of Ezinma, his younger daughter, who creates a soft spot in his heart due to the strength, character, and work ethic she possesses that he wishes his son held.

All that goes to say that my parents are extremely invested in my future because I have shown promise from the very beginning and have seldom disappointed them. I’m not sure what exactly lead to my parents being more emotionally supportive during my upbringing than during the upbringing of my siblings, but one thing that could possibly explain it is that there are a number of child psychology studies indicating that the same parents may parent each child differently depending on the traits and needs of that particular child. In a study conducted by Isabelle Roskam and John Christophe Meunier, they found there are three concepts of parenting: style, differential treatment, and coparenting consistency (Meunier, Roskam). For parenting style, three dimensions were studied: supportiveness, behavioral control, and psychological
control. Supportiveness for the purpose of this study meant warmth, responsiveness, and involvement; behavior control meant autonomy demands, monitoring, and setting rules; and psychological control meant harsh punishment, ignoring, coerciveness, guilt induction, and inconsistent discipline. The results of this study varied depending on how many siblings were in the families involved in the study, the parents education levels, and the individual child’s age and personality.

The most relevant part of this study for me was the section regarding the child’s personality. The study specified that children who displayed negative behavioral traits were found to be treated differently from their siblings (Meunier, Roskam). Although my brother never had behavioral issues at home or in school as a child, he was a poor student for as long as I can remember, and painfully timid. I personally theorize that my brother was generally shy from birth, but retreated even further into himself after my dad began showing his discontent with my brother’s mannerisms. Instead of my brother working to try to do things that made my parents proud, he stopped trying, became a recluse, and shied away from most people. It became a vicious cycle of him continuously disappointing my parents, my parents getting upset and lashing out at him, but then later conceding, after emotions died down, to offer him support and another chance to get ahead. This cycle has repeated for 23 years, and continues still. I can only hope that my younger sister doesn’t put them through the same amount of strife as she comes of age. My older sister is slowly but surely making her way towards her career aspirations, but it’s taking a little longer than what’s conventional. She has separate struggles due to being the first-born. According to Austrian psychiatrist, Alfred Adler, “a first-born's common feeling of a fear of losing the top position may make them more risk averse, and thus less likely to embark on
a new venture” (Adler). This could explain my sister’s fear of doing the wrong thing, thus resulting in her constantly trying to please others and in turn hurting herself. Now, she finds herself playing catch up. I’m not saying all of this to point the finger at all my siblings mishaps like my hands are clean, but I do think that my parents were able to overlook my mishaps when my siblings’ were more apparent. Of course I have messed up a lot along the way by not always pushing myself to my fullest potential, but all of those mistakes have been minor in the grand scheme of my life. Though these stark differences between my siblings and I can be partially attributed to personality traits, the parenting theories I discussed support the development of those differences too. Since I performed well in school, my parents were less likely to sanction me for little things.

Though my parents were wary of me pursuing a degree in communication studies because they didn’t believe it was lucrative, they relented grudgingly to my decision with the consolation that I would pursue a juris doctorate upon graduation, or some other professional degree that would round out my resume. Even though I convinced my parents to be alright with me studying communication, I never thought to myself what my exact plan would be in place of pursuing my JD. It’s funny how choosing your major is such a big ordeal in the collegiate world, but for me and many of my peers, not much thought is put into what you do with said degree afterwards. Can I just walk into some office and say I want to do communication for them? In what capacity? Where? How? I feel like this whole time that I’ve been “studying PR” I just kept envisioning the kind of career I would like to have, but never quite mapped out how I would achieve it. I just figured that with all my internship experience, something would just materialize upon graduation. Now that graduation is a month away, I’m realizing that I must be proactive
and not allow myself to add to the statistic of college grads that are unemployed. I have to utilize my contacts from previous internships, create a rough outline of job duties I see myself excelling in, and make a list of all the companies at which I could see myself working. Not to mention that I have to also decide whether I am willing to relocate from the Charlotte area, or North Carolina as a whole. Although I know I would like to stay in Charlotte (for reasons I’m not 100% sure are sound), I realized in my recent search that there are not many media opportunities in PR here. With that information in mind, I am now realizing that I may have to move in order to find the dream job that I envisioned. This dream job would consist of me getting to contribute my opinions on topics that I have genuine interest in, like fashion, beauty, and pop culture. I would be either a beauty consultant, a beauty blogger, a tv correspondent, or a publicist for a celebrity or beauty brand. If I were to land a career doing one of those, I would feel so fulfilled in life because my belief that I’m doing the “right thing” would be stronger. I have the blessing (and now what feels like a curse) of having a major that means that I can essentially do anything. This means that it should be easy for me to decide on a career, right? Wrong. I have no idea what aspect of communication appeals to me most. This is where my journey comes into view.

Throughout my college career, and even in high school, I have always made strides towards professional development, networking opportunities, and overall self-improvement because I think that it can benefit me in the future. This has been the motivation behind most of the things I’ve done so far in life--I believe that they will pay off eventually, even if I didn’t strategically set it up to play out that way. I did job shadowing programs at news stations, I was an extra in a few movies, and I completed multiple internships and held several leadership roles that have given me connections within the event planning and media industries. I’m not sure
what made me decide to be so ambitious at such a young age, but for some reason, I always knew that being a well-rounded individual would help me to get me further in life. Until now, this mindset has proven itself to be a truth. What worries me most however, is that I haven’t loved anything that I’ve done so far. I enter each new endeavor optimistic that I’ll discover my passion, and each time I leave that endeavor relieved that it is over. I get so excited learning of a new opportunity, thinking that it will bring me an advantage and add to my repertoire of hard skills and further prepare me for future careers. Then somewhere along the way I realize that I don’t love the experience or want to pursue further opportunities in that field. I find aspects of the job I don’t like, which end up influencing my overall feelings about the job. Or, if there aren’t aspects that I dislike about the endeavor, it’s also that no aspect particularly excited me about the endeavor, either. My worry is that this dissatisfaction will follow me into the workforce and plague me until I land a position that I actually do love. Ann Friedman from Fortune advises us 21 year old soon-to-be grads that it’s ok to not love your first job. Friedman writes, “In fact, it might be better that way. The point of your first few jobs is just to try out different roles, responsibilities and different types of work environments”. Ted Power, former Google employee, adds:

“There’s a lot of pressure to find your dream job, or something that you absolutely love...That can almost be counterproductive because you have such high expectations. What’s more important is trying a bunch of stuff and figuring out what you like doing day to day. There are a lot of jobs that sound amazing, but the day to day is working in Excel or something.”
This advice from older millennials does offer some reassurance, but I still do wish that I find something I won’t dread or feel ill-equipped in doing. I do not want to sound completely pessimistic, because there have been some saving graces for me throughout college, experiences that have helped me understand myself better along the way.

The second part of this project entails me picking certain artifacts that encompass my college experience and integrating my overall theory into the explanation of each one. Those artifacts include: my laptop, my SGA nametags and Center for Leadership Development certificates, and my cross necklace. As I elaborate on each artifact that is representative of some of my most noteworthy college experiences, my initial theory of Reasoned Action of self-discovery will reemerge.

One of the things that helped me determine my path throughout college is the instrument I am typing on right now. My lime green ASUS notebook/laptop has been with me since the day I stepped foot on this campus, through the technical difficulties and all. There is no grand backstory as to how I obtained this laptop. Growing up in my household, we always had desktop computers for family use and then upon graduating high school, we each received laptops. Since I am the third child in my house, I saw my older sister and brother receive laptops after high school. My sister before she went to college in Durham, NC, and my brother before he went to boarding school in Nigeria. When it was finally time for me to prepare for college, my mom took me to Best Buy and told me to select something that I liked. I have never been much of a deliberator when deciding on non-life-altering things, so when I saw a cute, lime green notebook that was quite inexpensive, I told my mom I wanted it and we left the store with it that day. As demonstrated by this mini anecdote, there was no subjective norm that influenced my decision
on choosing this laptop. My mom didn’t voice a preference for a certain brand, even though I’m sure she appreciated that I saved her money, so I just went with the ASUS because I had an instant positive attitude towards it.

It was only after getting home that we realized it was a notebook, which meant that there was no CD rom disk. I was still completely in love with having my own computer, and was excited to have it for the duration of my college career and beyond. I didn’t know then that my prized computer would only last me for a year in one piece. At the end of the fall of my sophomore year, the keys on my keyboard began to jam, so when I pressed certain keys, I’d have to knead the button for it to work. Eventually, even digging my entire knuckle into certain keys stopped being effective, and my computer became temporarily useless. Undeterred and resilient, I took my notebook to the on-campus Apple store because I knew they had a troubleshooting department and would likely be able to find the problem. It turns out that they could not determine the reason the keys were out of whack, and actually told me that to replace the keyboard would essentially be the same cost as buying a new notebook and that it was not worth it. After sharing the news with my parents, they asked me what I wanted to do. They said they could either get me a new computer or I could manage with a USB keyboard. I decided to go with the latter because I consider myself a simple girl, and that’s what I have been using ever since. At that point, the decision was not hard for me to make. As soon as I told my parents the price that the repair shop offered me to fix my keys, my parents agreed with me that it was not a worthy solution. Their expectation, coupled with my already existing attitude, lead me to easily decide that I would not repair the keys and that I would just stick it out.
As disappointing as it was to have a laptop that didn’t last in its good condition for more than a year, I still cherish the fact that it works, has stored all my papers I have written in my college career up to date, and that it represents when I started a new chapter in my life. For these reasons it is one of the artifacts I chose to reflect my growth and experiences; it has supported my college career, and is doing so even now, as I type this paper. Deciding to keep my broken laptop instead of getting it fixed is a direct reflection of my simple and easily satisfied personality. It is also representative of my voyage through college; It represents the idea that persevering and finishing college is very important, that it’s not always easy, and that sometimes you might be just barely hanging on. This trait of resilience and determination will be useful in my life post graduation because I’m sure that I will be receiving plenty of rejections as I continue applying for jobs. As a young twenty-something fresh out of college, I am just another one out of the masses of fish swarming to get noticed by the company of their dreams. Having the ability to keep persisting in my search for employment with high spirits is a valuable trait that I’m glad I possess because it’s so easy to be discouraged by things not resulting how you envisioned them to in life.

As a student, there are many times when giving up seems like the best option, rather than continuing on in a delirious stupor of exhaustion. There are so many friends I’ve had that decided part-way through their journey that higher education wasn’t the place for them and I don’t blame them. The pressures and demands of school can discourage even the most resilient students because there can come a point when they perceive that it’s too much. According to U.S. News, as much as 1 in 3 freshmen do not return to school for their sophomore year. Reasons for that vary, from financial reasons to loneliness or family problems (U.S. News). For me,
especially during the past couple of semesters, it’s been extremely difficult to stay on top of my workload and to maintain high spirits. I often joke with friends that I pulled one too many all-nighters in high school and as a result, didn’t have it in me to keep doing that in college. Growing up, I never took naps, and I seldom felt the chronic exhaustion that I suddenly began experiencing last year. I realized that although my mind was not registering that I was stressed because I thankfully inherited my mother’s calm disposition, my body was screaming at me to slow down. I developed extremely tense and damaged muscle tissues around my neck and back which, coupled with my minor scoliosis from a car accident in 2008, flares up pretty badly when I’m bogged down with a ton of work. Still, I didn’t take heed.

I continued adding more responsibilities to my workload because as I mentioned earlier, we millennials are caught up in trying to ensure our future success by overdoing and trying to be the best at everything. As mentioned earlier in this paper, millennials have more pressure than previous generations to be successful and it is extremely competitive these days because every parent wants their child to be the “best”: to attend the best schools, be the best athlete, have the best GPA, have the best job, etc. The subjective norm heavily comes into focus here because these pressures to be the best obviously come from close relationships either explicitly or implicitly expressing their expectations to the student. Not only does the pressure come from significant others, but it also comes from peers. Millennials are more likely to compare themselves to their peers due to the surge in social media use in recent years. According to social comparison theory, “people evaluate their opinions and abilities, emotions and personality traits; and people also try to enhance their self-esteem and self-concept by comparing themselves to others. They also develop positive or negative feelings about themselves as a result of
comparison” (Lee). For me, I didn’t necessarily participate in my leadership activities to compete with or “one-up” others.

My situation is slightly different because I genuinely have been a leader throughout my entire life, not just when I realized it was a competitive thing to do. I have vivid memories of the exhilaration I felt as an elementary student when I got accepted into a new club. I’m appreciative of the fact that I always went to the best schools where leadership opportunities were plenty. I was a peer mediator, a member of the art club, a member of the ink jets recycle club, and I read the afternoon announcements over the intercom. All of these activities took place before I even turned 11, so that by the time I was in middle school, I was inducted into National Junior Honor Society, a member of the step and dance team, in the school chorus, and many other leadership and academic scholarship activities. I participated in a pre-college STEM program at NC State for two years in middle school preparing me for my future education. With such a great start in my earlier years, you can only imagine the involvement I undertook in high school.

Campus pride and involvement has been a part of my identity for as long as I can remember, but adding so many extracurriculars to my already full academic coursework made me dread waking up every morning to all the responsibilities and challenges. As I am finishing my college career, I feel more exhausted than ever, and realize I am burnt out. My zeal has diminished because I’ve pushed myself for so long to always perform, that now I am not wanting to do even the most basic things. However, during this time, it is important to remind myself that I didn’t come this far to mess up or do mediocre things. My journey as a high achiever hasn’t always been smooth or easy, and I remind myself of an anonymous quote I found somewhere that states, “you have to be uncomfortable in order to be comfortable.” This quote
has stuck with me through many obstacles when I felt complaints about my life bubbling to the
surface. I remind myself many people don’t have the academic gift I have, many people don’t
have the opportunities that I have, and many people don’t have the support that I have, so I
should be eternally grateful.

My second artifact is my Student Government Association (SGA) nametag. SGA is
something that I began doing my sophomore year of college, just as a fulfillment of something I
did not get the chance to do in high school. That year, however was not my first attempt at
joining. One day, I was walking back to my freshman dorm when an ad caught my eye for
student government. On a whim, I decided to run for an elected senate position and immediately
launched my campaign because I thought it would be really cool to obtain a seat during my first
semester of college. I wanted to see what the hype of student government was all about. I was
blessed to live in one of the few residence halls at the time that offered free printing, so I printed
dozens of flyers with my smiling face plastered across the front urging people to vote for me, and
I distributed them on every floor of all the residence halls on the south side of campus. I asked
the friends that I acquired during my first month and a half at college to vote for me, and I also
asked people that I didn’t know to vote for me as well. After the election period, the results came
in and I had lost by 12 votes. Up until that moment, I had not been rejected or denied many
opportunities before. I was used to my achievements coming somewhat easily to me and I
genuinely wasn’t expecting to lose the election, despite the fact that my campaign efforts were
relatively minimal.

Following the loss, it took some self-rationalization to convince myself that maybe it just
wasn’t the season for that in my life. The persistence I demonstrated with my laptop artifact
reemerges here again because I had to remind myself that other opportunities would come and there was a reason that it didn’t work out for me that time around. There have been a few instances where I’ve had to do some self-rationalization when I have wanted something, and have not been able to achieve it. I concluded in those times, that although I work hard, I seldom exhaust all my resources to reach the goals, and this is something that bothers me. I wish that I could say I worked blood, sweat, and tears to achieve something that I wanted badly. However, I console myself with the thought that if I want something very much, I will tap into my inner resources. Despite this slightly disturbing realization, I have also confirmed my resilient nature. In many research studies, resilience results in developing positive feelings, such as happiness, contentment, joy, which leads to an improved immune system and better mental and emotional state (Mills and Dombeck). No matter what rejection I have faced, my response is to move forward with confidence to try it from a different angle.

What stands out to me about the student government election is that I still found a way to be involved in student government the following year through the process of being appointed. The appointment process required me to obtain a certain amount of signatures, be interviewed by the internal affairs committee in senate, and speak before the general senate highlighting the reasons why I wanted to join. After completing the process, I was officially approved as a senator for the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences, and was sworn in under oath in fall 2013. From that point forward, I fell in love with the process. I loved the professionalism and formality of the senate, I loved that I got to learn of new plans for the university from administration before they reached the general student body, and I loved that real legislation was written in advocacy of the students. I wanted to be involved in all parts of it. Although I was often timid to
speak up for the first few months, just having the privilege of a vote was exhilarating for me. The year following my time on senate, I was asked by the Student Body Vice President, much to my surprise, to be in the executive cabinet and serve as the Secretary for Diversity Affairs. Not only was this an elevation of my status within SGA, but it was an opportunity to interact directly with administrators even more so than before. Without those stepping stones that lead me through the doors of SGA and allowed me to climb the ranks and develop and even more positive attitude toward advocating on behalf of the student body, I would not be Chief of Staff today.

My third artifact, my collection of Center for Leadership Development (CLD) completion certificates, and now my Who’s Who certificate, continues to reflect the theme of leadership in my life. The CLD is a fairly well-known and familiar place for student leaders on campus, because many of the leadership groups on campus have offices there. I experienced my first taste of the CLD office when I was accepted into the prestigious Emerging Leaders group, a group of 50 carefully selected students. We met weekly for 2-3 hours and participated in leadership development workshops and etiquette dinners, and we made new friends with fellow freshmen. Through the program, I met four girls with whom I consider to still be close friends today. The other members of my EL class have all moved on to do phenomenal work on and off campus. Many of them are leaders of their organizations, interns at large corporations like Google and Cisco, or are maintaining the 4.0 GPA that so many students covet.

Upon completion of that year long program, we had a graduation ceremony and received certificates. While I was completing the EL program, I was also obtaining my license to lead from PiLOT, another program hosted by the CLD office. Both programs finished around the same time, and at the end I was given the opportunity to apply for the Omicron Delta Kappa
Freshman Leadership Award because of my positive view of leadership and everyone in the organization encouraging me that I would be the perfect fit for the recipient. This award is the only freshman award given at the Chancellor’s Honors and Awards ceremony at the end of the year. I was blessed to be chosen as the recipient of the award in April 2013. The following summer between my sophomore and junior year, I was asked to attend the LeaderShape Institute, a six-day program that highlighted leading with integrity and trying to make a difference. All of these leadership development programs have truly motivated me to surround myself with successful people and continue aspiring to excellence. I believe that you are the company you keep, and participating in the various programs offered by the CLD and associated offices has truly been enlightening for me in choosing my future aspirations and developing more positive feelings towards leadership.

Who’s Who was an amazing addition to my collection of certificates. Although it is a national award, the ceremony was still orchestrated by the CLD at UNC Charlotte, and I felt extremely honored to have received such a notable award that I feel perfectly punctuated my tenure. This is the time of year where all your efforts are recognized and I must say it feels good to end on this note. I feel like I would not have been eligible for receiving this award if it had not been for my work with the CLD office for all of these years. As the people around me continued confirming my apt for leadership and my attitude continued growing favorably towards the act of helping people and making my voice heard, my behavior reflected it.

The last artifact that I will talk about is my cross necklace that I wear every day. Usually, if someone has a piece of jewelry that they seldom or never take off, it often represents either familial ties, or it was gifted to them from someone they love. In my case, I found this necklace
in a random pile of junk my neighbor was giving away when I was still in high school. I chose it from all of the other items in the bag. I thought it was pretty, and liked how it sparkled. I was raised a devout Christian because in my family God is the provider of all and we have Him to forever give our thanks and praise. When I find myself slacking in any aspect of life, whether it be in my physical health, spiritual health, academic journey, personal relationships, mental health, etc., the Lord has always come through and guided my path, even in the times that I forget to call on Him.

There are times where I sit back in disbelief at all the blessings and opportunities that have been provided for me and for my family, and the cross that I haven’t taken off for six years has become a symbol of divine favor that has directed my life, and especially my college career. I feel that every opportunity has been carefully crafted for my journey, and all the disappointments and triumphs have been timed and have occurred in such a manner that I understand the power He has over my life. My cross comforts me in times when I am afraid, in times when I am apprehensive, and in times when I need guidance. Throughout my time in college, I have also defined my personal relationship with Christ and have determined my level of spirituality, as well as shaped my own views. College is where I stopped going to Catholic church and began my non-denominational journey, and it was one of the best spiritual decisions for me. I say this because back when I still attended Catholic church, I felt disconnected and distracted while sitting through mass. All the practices of Roman Catholicism are very ancient, from singing in Latin hymns to reciting short phrases repetitively at different points throughout the service. I felt removed from the process because Monsignor, the Priest, didn’t relay stories with animation or relate it to real life. Up until college, that was my limited perception of church.
Then I was introduced to Road to Damascus church, a nondenominational church on campus one of my friends invited me to attend.

After attending that first time, I knew that I had found a new place of comfort and strength within my religion. I cried every time I attended RTD for the first month or so after joining the church, it was just such a touching and engaging experience, one that was completely different from what I was used to in the Catholic church. I’ve always had a positive relationship with Christ, but switching paths from Catholicism to nondenominational has increased my understanding of His word even more, strengthening my positive attitude towards my faith. My parents, friends and family always encourage me to pray in trying times, which only helps to influence my behavior to try being a better Christian everyday.

All of these artifacts have contributed significantly to my discovery and understanding of myself at UNC Charlotte. My artifacts symbolize courage, faith, strength, resilience, and simplicity—and highlight the facets of my character that became more apparent in recent years. It has taken this paper for me to realize that my entire life leading up to college has consisted of my parents majorly influencing my attitude towards things. Even though my parents raised me to be independent, my former notion that I was self-made proved to be false after reflecting on how much my parents and my culture have influenced my behavioral intent. It’s their influence that enhanced my decision making process, however, I also concluded that choosing my own journey is so critical to success in college and thereafter. If many people followed their hearts from the start, there would be a lot less soul searching and money wasted along the way. The Theory of Reasoned Action allows for a healthy dose of both external influence and personal beliefs to shape behavioral intentions. It’s important to remember that at the end of the day, the final
decision to act is still yours, and that’s going to be a constant reminder for me in the years to come as I navigate my first job and life to come.