Building bridges was selected as the metaphor I have drawn upon to help define my work as a doctoral student at St. John’s University. Gareth Morgan in his classic 1997 text, *Images of Organizations* writes, “Metaphor is often regarded just as a device for embellishing discourse, but its significance is much greater than this. The use of metaphor implies a way of thinking and a way of seeing that pervades how we understand our world generally.” As a metaphor for educational leadership, bridges function as a visual representation for channeling school reform efforts, fostering collaboration, providing access and equity for ALL students, reducing isolation, and creating possibilities for powerful conversations about teaching and learning.

In rapid times of change, it is easy to lose sight of what matters most in the field of education: our students. Teaching and learning are at the heart of school improvement. Our efforts to improve public education in this country will not succeed until we get serious about strengthening school leadership. Educators, policy makers, and politicians need to stop arguing, find common ground, and “build bridges” among various reform efforts, so that we can achieve our goal of educating ALL of our children for productive adulthood in a future we can now only imagine.
As master architects of the world’s most amazing bridges know, the journey is filled with obstacles and opportunities. I approach the challenges ahead knowing that the foundation that has been built via the educational courses offered throughout the St. John’s University Doctoral Program in Educational Leadership and Accountability. Under the tutelage of Dr. Hughes, the esteemed scholar and researcher at St. John’s University, Oakdale, NY, doctoral students have successfully completed a significant ascent: Semi-Doctorous Completius: for extraordinarious, prodigious workus, and completious of multitudinous administratious and managerius taskus as nauseum. We are regrouping and preparing for the next great stage of the journey that will propel us closer to the domain of scholar: the dissertation process.

The five components or areas of study in the St. John’s Doctoral Program in Educational Leadership and Accountability are leadership, organizational theory, policy and politics, management, and research methodology. The first course offered in the Cohort 11 doctoral program was Educational Planning facilitated by Dr. Korynne Taylor-Dunlop. Dr. Dunlop outlined the goals, expectations, and challenges that lie ahead with steadfast assurance that each one of us could attain what only 10% of the population has ever accomplished. The focus of Educational Planning was planned changed in education, conceptually and practically. Cohort 11 analyzed different matrices, models, and theoretical frameworks to evaluate planned change in educational settings. These theoretical frameworks were used to examine organizational challenges and to develop constructivist strategies for sustainable educational leadership and improvement. Cohort 11 studied theoretical frameworks via the text, Sustainable Leadership by Andy Hargreaves and Dean Fink. Educational leaders must be willing to learn from the past, controversy, and diversity in order to glean from one another perspectives that provide insight
for a brighter future. According to Hargreaves and Fink (2006), change in education is easy to propose, hard to implement, and extraordinarily difficult to sustain.

Dr. Dunlop introduced and explained the seminal theoretical framework of Dr. Smith’s ADC model based on instruction, governance, organization, and accountability. The cohort extensively studied the framework of the Popekewitz model of education through the lenses of technical, illusory, and constructivist schools. Throughout this course we also studied the works of Wehlage, Resnick, Bolman and Deal, and Stone. We gained an understanding of applying a theoretical framework as a lens in which to look through when identifying problems, proposing solutions, and perpetuating change initiatives within school settings.

Dr. Jonathon T. Hughes introduced us to the first course of many involving the collection of data. “It’s not about what you know, or what you don’t know, it’s about what you don’t know you don’t know” (Hughes, 2010). Thus the journey into School Based Data Analysis began. Objectives of this course were to effectively synthesize a target school district’s data, compare the data to similar schools, and successfully identify and implement appropriate strategies that would ultimately lead increased student achievement. In analyzing and sifting through a plethora of data from Budget Pulse, Data Points, Geo-Tracks, Mapinfo Geographic, and Vital Signs we were able to use data to frame the problem. The 5 C’s: content, compare, contrast, context, and construct (Hughes, 2010), was the framework applied by the cohort to gain a deeper understanding of the data and its impact on the districts studied. After deeply examining the “root causes” behind the target district’s areas of strength and areas in need of improvement, we were able to create an accountability plan to aid the target district move toward its aspiration. By carefully studying trends and relationships between and among the districts, we were able to make informed decisions to improve student performance and ensure optimal
results. Throughout the course, Dr. Hughes recommended a wealth of professional resources, including, *The Death and Life of the Great American School System*, by Diane Ravitch, *Getting Excited about Data* by Edie Holcomb, *Organizational Culture and Leadership*, by Edgar Schein, and *Good to Great* by Jim Collins.

The *Politics in Education* course taught by Dr. Frank Smith focused on Deborah Stone’s notion of the paradoxical nature of the political process. Stone’s text, *Policy Paradox: The Art of Political Decision Making*, was the theoretical framework for all course projects and tasks. Stone’s work provided a model to approach research in terms of goals, problems, and solutions. Stone compares and contrasts the market model and the polis model, and demonstrates how the polis model can be used to describe how political decisions are crafted.

In an effort to further our understanding of Stone’s framework, the cohort conducted thematic analyses of several additional works which included, *Whatever it Takes*, by Paul Tough, *Between Public and Private*, by Katrina Bulkley, et.al., and a case study on civic capacity by Clarence Stone. The cohort worked in various, interchangeable groups to create product matrices that were used for culminating, group research papers. These research projects allowed the cohort to synthesize Stone’s work in order to answer the research question, “How shall the schools be governed?” The rigorous content and coursework was thought-provoking, stimulating, and enabled the cohort to gain a greater depth and understanding of the intersection of politics and education.

*Qualitative Research*, the first of two research courses taught by Dr. Taylor-Dunlop, provided doctoral students with a framework for a qualitative study. Dr. Taylor-Dunlop explained how qualitative research should be “rich, think, and deep.” As researchers we learned how to gather data to uncover patterns, themes, and discrepancies within sample research.
*Advanced Research and Design* extended our understanding of the research process and sharpened our ability to design either a quantitative or qualitative study. This course allowed us to develop research questions and adopt a theoretical framework within which we could research our problem statements. Throughout this course we learned the aspects about the process, research, development, and synthesis of a dissertation.

As we move into the 21st century, educational leaders must be prepared to confront the challenges caused by the ever changing world of technology. By creating a school culture deeply rooted in lifelong learning, instructional leaders can successfully guide educators and students into a global world. *Research and Development in Instructional Strategies taught by* Dr. Smith was a wonderful opportunity to investigate teaching and learning in the 21st century. We studied Japanese Lesson Study by watching video clips and comparing this instructional methodology to the traditional methods utilized in the United States. By examining the Lesson Study Model, we discovered that one of the main differences between Japanese and American systems for teaching and learning was directly related to the planning process and the time designated for colleagues to reflect and debrief following the lesson. By analyzing Lesson Study, I acknowledged the importance for teachers to have time built into their schedules for collaboration, evaluation, and reflection.

The creation of the *Digital Portfolio* provided doctoral students with the opportunity to reflect on their careers as professional educators. Dr. Francesco Ianni prepared us for the challenge of cultivating a metaphor to support the five modules of the digital portfolio: Personal, Professional, Learner, Expert, and Scholar Folios. Throughout the course, Dr. Ianni provided insights for the development of the skeleton of the website and he modeled how to organize this framework into a cohesive display of artifacts. The digital portfolio serves as a placeholder, not
only to document the knowledge and expertise gained from the St. John’s Doctoral Program, but having time for collaboration with colleagues in website design will no doubt strengthen skills and competencies in our work as instructional leaders. I tried to capture the essence of my journey throughout the pages of my digital portfolio to demonstrate how my identity as a learner, scholar, and leader has developed through trial and error, reflection, study, and mentorship. What excites me the most is that this is a profession that requires lifelong learning. The contents of my digital portfolio will continue to evolve as I grow and develop as an educational leader and researcher. I can only hope that in three years from now, I will look back on the leader I am today and reflect on my contributions to the field since then.

Throughout the course, *Data Analysis I*, Dr. Hughes introduced cohort members to the computer software Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). SPSS is the software package that provides researchers with the capability of diligent data analysis. SPSS allows researchers to input data and run various reports. These reports can determine if your data is skewed or if your survey is flawed. The reports can also identify areas of concern based on the various outcomes of measurement. My experience in this course was both valuable and practical because, as a school district administrator, one of my priorities is data analysis and using data to drive instruction. Furthermore, the skills that I honed throughout this course will assist me with interpreting research data as it relates to my dissertation topic.

*Data Analysis II* was a continuation of the study of statistical inquiry which began in Data Analysis I. What set this course apart from Data Analysis I was the focus on inferential statistical analyses. Throughout this course, Dr. Ianni provided instruction on using descriptive and inferential statistics to investigate research topics, summarize and interpret data using SPSS, and organize and analyze data in the research paper format. Many topics were explored
including the following: descriptive and inferential statistics, distribution analysis, and correlation and regression analysis. The purpose of the final project was to complete a five chapter research paper: description of the problem, research questions, literature review, methodology, description of the variables in the context of the research, findings (tables, graphs, regression analysis created using SPSS), descriptions of the findings, and conclusions and recommendations. Students were required to support the research findings with descriptive and inferential statistics.

*Collecting Bargaining* introduced doctoral students to the complexities and nuances associated with collective bargaining and contract negotiations. Fisher, Ury, and Patton the authors of the text, *Getting to Yes*, suggest that knowing and developing alternatives to reaching an agreement with the other party are oftentimes a source of great power. Drs. Hughes created a collective bargaining scenario which required the cohort members to complete the preparation, analysis, and bargaining of a Teacher’s Union contract for a school system. The cohort was divided into two groups representing a Teacher’s Union and a Board of Education. Each constituency was presented with a set of criteria that guided the framework for the negotiations. By participating in integrative bargaining, both parties were inspired to engage in purposeful dialogue with the intention of progressing towards a reasonable settlement. The final group project was a report to the Board of Education outlining the bargaining settlement related to initial goals and objectives. As a result of this experience, we learned that there are degrees of distinction involved in the negotiations process.

*Advanced Leadership in Schools*, facilitated by Dr. Smith, acquainted Cohort 11 members to the nuances and complexities associated with different perspectives on theory building. This course focused on three focal points: different perspectives on theory building in
educational administration, contemporary views of theory building with an emphasis on Gareth Morgan and the Chicago research team led by Anthony Bryk, and the intellectual tasks associated with the writing of Chapter 2 for a dissertation which involves creating a conceptual framework. Dr. Smith implemented Moodle to post our individual and group assignments. As Cohort 11 members responded to the tasks presented by Dr. Smith, we would also read and critiqued the responses of our colleagues. Throughout the coursework, we examined conceptual frameworks and how we apply them to current research on leadership theory. The most important notion that I gleaned from this course was that if educational leaders want to reform education, first and foremost, they have to change the metaphor. The information shared and presented by Dr. Smith was timely and relevant to the issues that 21st century educational leaders must be prepared to assume.

The journey of understanding *Multicultural Organization* was led by Dr. Cynthia Douglas. If American educators fail to place multiculturalism and racial and cultural competence at the forefront of teacher education programs and professional development initiatives, we risk depriving our children of the enriched, equitable, rigorous education they are entitled to. Educational leaders must stand up for ALL students, demonstrate courage, and take risks by moving beyond awareness of multiculturalism and racial and cultural competence in American education. It is vital that all design and implementation decisions regarding education in the 21st century take into consideration the success of marginalized racial/ethnic groups and students’ and teachers’ understanding of cultural, social, and political inequities. The importance for educators to think deeply about how their attitudes and actions shape classroom communities and school cultures is imperative. Educators are called upon to embrace students from all backgrounds and they must be committed to understand, support, guide, and encourage them.
Whether White people intend to or not, they must grasp that many beliefs are taken for granted, they must be sensitive to the reality of White privilege, and the sense of entitlement that results in order to revolutionize the disparities in American education.

Who better than Dr. Anthony Annunziato to lead the Finance in Education course? No one! Dr. Annunziato shared invaluable information about timely topics related to the budget process, such as: the Impact of the 2% Property Tax Cap, the Role and Responsibilities of the School Business Official, Internal and External Audits, Expenditures, Revenue, the Budget Calendar, Debt Service, Fund Balance, and Types of School Budgets. During the second weekend, the majority of time was devoted to the school budget analysis project. This project provided cohort members with the opportunity to look at the budget process from the very beginning to the date of the community vote on May. In order to complete this project we utilized the budgets that were developed by our School Business Officials for the 2012 budget vote. Since the budget process is one of the most important functions that occurs in a school district, having the time to complete the budget analysis project was a worthwhile and practical task. As a result of this experience, we learned that there are degrees of distinction involved in the budget process.

Advanced Study in Organizational Theory, led by Dr. Frank Smith, challenged Cohort 11 members to develop theories on leadership in organizations known as schools. Dr. Smith posed the essential question: "What types of leadership roles do these competing systems prescribe for principals?" (Classnotes, 2012). Dr. Smith contends, “What is the implicit view of the good school embedded in the evaluation systems: formal organization or community? Is the principal’s role to be an ‘officer’ or a ‘professional colleague’?” (Class notes, 2012). At the onset of the course, Cohort 11 members examined the work of Hoyle and Pfeffer and then closely read
a set of sources to construct a conceptual framework for the analysis of the Multi-dimensional Principal’s Performance Rubric (MPPR). The sources of leadership theory included Stanford University’s panel of current leaders, the Cremin and Dewey perspective, Smith's ADC Model, Bryk's study of relational trust in Chicago, Sergiovanni’s construct for moral leadership, Stone’s model for civic capacity, and a study of the DNA of leadership in Toyota. Cohort 11 members conducted qualitative research by analyzing the aforementioned perspectives of leadership theory. As researchers, we set out to discover the direction of the state’s Race to the Top (RttT) policy in regards to an analysis of the literature on school leadership. The final project, a five chapter research paper, examined and presented procedures used in order to answer the research question: What are the predominant perspectives on leadership, based in leadership theory, that are embedded in the MPPR? Information was collected through a variety of sources to obtain data on the models of effective leadership embedded in the MPPR. The professional readings were analyzed by engaging in thematic/content analyses via close reading as a means to capture the perspective on authority represented in the seven sources.

And lastly, we arrive at the final course, Educational Governance and Policy led by Dr. D’Ambrosio. Dr. D’Ambrosio shared invaluable information about timely topics related to school governance and policy issues, such as, setting standards, understanding accountability roles, the impact of pressure groups, the political environment, and policy development. Throughout the course students gained an understanding of educational governance theories, their application to specific educational issues, and a practical understanding of conflict resolution. Dr. D’Ambrosio explained the role, relationships, and responsibilities of the hierarchical nature of school systems as it relates to politics and policy development. One of our assignments was to interview a Superintendent or Assistant Superintendent about Policy
During the interview process, I discovered how and why policies are created in school districts. Additionally, I realized that laying the groundwork for a policy requires a great deal of time and commitment. A policy implementation plan should be aligned with the district’s vision. Moreover, once a policy is in place, continued reflection and review are required, as well as on-going evaluation. The opportunity to make necessary changes where necessary must also be a viable option. This assignment was both practical and informative. Developing policies is an integral component of the work that central office administrators must do in order to sustain and maintain procedures and protocols, while adhering to state and federal mandates.

As I approach the end of a fortuitous journey of self-discovery, learning, and professional renewal, I am poised to reach new heights and tackle the challenges and complexities of the dissertation process. It’s hard to believe, but my doctoral coursework is complete, my digital portfolio, forever a work in progress, and yet the most significant part of the journey is just beginning: the dissertation process. The last three years have not been easy. I have worked harder than I have ever worked before. These years have been full of stress, self-doubt, and quite a few sleepless nights spent reading, researching, writing, and wondering whether or not I could reach the summit. It is tempting to retreat. But even on the most challenging of days, my colleagues, friends, and family find a way to remind me of why I became an educator in the first place. I am an educator because I am convinced that if educators continually focus their energies on teaching and learning, then schools will become true learning organizations for all of its members and achievement will be maximized.

Leadership is an essential ingredient for ensuring that every child in America gets the education they need to succeed. Teachers are on the front line of learning. But instructional
leaders are positioned to provide a climate of high expectations, a clear vision for teaching and learning, and the means for all stakeholders to realize the vision. Leadership is the “bridge” that can bring together all of the required elements of school reform into a cohesive whole.

I am ever grateful for the esteemed professors at St. John’s University, Oakdale, NY, and for my clever colleagues from Cohort 11 who have supported me, been a sounding board for new ideas, and inspired me to strive each and every day to challenge the status quo. Thank you Dr. Hughes, Dr. Smith, Dr. Bernato, Dr. Dunlop, Dr. Ianni, Dr. Annunziato, Dr. Douglas, Dr. D’Ambrosio, Professor Faucetta, Mrs. Gonsalves, Mr. Rosenberg, and the members of Cohort 11. I know there are endless possibilities that lie ahead; it is a challenge and a privilege for me to embrace every opportunity with confidence, courage, and hope. For without your support, encouragement, sage advice, knowledge, and expertise this journey would not be possible.

With gratitude.