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## **My Unique Ph.D. Path to a Limitless Existence as a Scholar**

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## About the Author



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## My Unique Ph.D. Path to a Limitless Existence as a Scholar



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Life is an endless journey of so-called failures and successes. My journey had many paths; paths that connected and led me on a unique exploration. An exploration that was tethered to a lingering question: “What is my purpose?” I have never truly answered this question, but that question led me to the motivational theme of my life: Be Limitless. This mantra incited me to embark on a Ph.D. journey, *From Imposter to Believer*, and *From a Thug to a Scholar*. At face value, my past seems distant and disparate from my current academic positioning and stance on knowledge. However, when I look back and connect the dots, my past experiences directed me on this journey and prepared me for this joyful ride called scholarship.

In elementary school, my biological father stepped away and signed over his parental rights. This left me confused and rejected, but I was unable to express my discomfort and dejection in a positive fashion (Williams, 2021). I sought refuge in peer acceptance, inciting me to act out with negative behavior that led me to various reprimands, suspensions, judgments, and problems in school. Yet, in the depths of my psyche, I knew that a solid education or some miracle in the form of a professional sports contract was my only avenue to a successful life, by my own definition. There was always abstract thinking about success, but there was no direct path. There was no one in my immediate family that ventured down the path of a four-year degree.

My mother completed an associate's degree that never opened major doors or successful pathways, and she often commented that with a four-year degree, the ascension to management positions and accompanying significant pay increases would have been within her reach. I had no path; I was a wayward child who had a rebellious nature. This nature would eventually serve as a boon to my Ph.D. path and to my success as a scholar, but it only became transparent as I looked back with no judgment and pure acceptance of my past experiences (Williams, 2020). Many people distance themselves from a troubled past or their past in general. However, I believe our past can be used to uncover patterns that lead us to our inherent truth – our true path. I added up and took an assessment of my so-called life failures, such as selling drugs in high school, fathering two children in high school, flunking out of college, and embracing a negative mentality, to name a few (Williams, 2021).

I began to remove the scales from my eyes, and I began to shift my paradigm from a negative and pessimistic mentality to a positive and optimistic mentality. This propelled me to see the silver lining in my deviant past and rebellious, strong-willed nature. I saw that I rejected the pathways to my inherent truth and the keys to unlocking the doors on my mysterious journey. When I was an adolescent and young adult, I rejected reading, speaking, acting, and writing. Now, those tasks are the sources of my income and motivation to be limitless. As a youth, I viewed reading and writing as tasks that accompanied sagacious individuals; individuals who were teased and bullied in my impoverished environment and low-ranking schools. I was not willing to take the less-traveled road during K-12, but I did respect Robert Frost: I embraced his advice when I returned to an intentional educational path (Williams, 2021).

Yet, as I reminisce about those wayward years and troubled direction where I was headed, I witnessed signposts that prepared me for my path towards a Ph.D. and a limitless trek ahead. Recently, I discovered that my top five strength codes were Input, Strategic, Learner, Positivity, and Achiever, according to *Strength Finder*. This recent finding illuminated some of these signposts as I reflect on past situations. For example, I rebelled against my parents and other confrontational authorities when I could not gather enough information to accept their instruction or opinions. Strategically, I would find alternatives to their given suggestions, and I would research to find irrefutable evidence to support my thought process, even if it was perceived as negative. Throughout my life, I prided myself on learning the rules of street life (e.g., how to walk to the store and converse with violent individuals without becoming a victim) and on utilizing that knowledge in pragmatic ways.

Teachers reprimanded me for talking too much in class and, ironically, for asking too many questions. Teachers told me to write about my reasons for misbehaving in class, and my parents forced me to read the Bible and attend theater when I was disciplined in school. I uncovered positivity and an achiever mindset when I was coerced into these endeavors, and those strengths have served me well on my scholarly journey. On my path to my Ph.D., I entered this domain with trepidation and felt like an imposter. I did not belong. However, this is not a new emotion or feeling, even as a child, I never felt normal or like I belonged. I embodied the mindset of an imposter on an arduous expedition to complete my Ph.D. (Williams, 2020). Once again, looking backward gave me the vision to accept the Ph.D. path with confidence.

I saw my past from a perspective of purpose, growth, and hope. I no longer dwelled on what could be; I only saw the past as what was, the present as what is, and the future as what will be. I collected input on how to be the best Ph.D. student, how to strategize to learn more than other students, how to acquire the requisite skill sets to achieve as a Ph.D. student and scholar, and how to do this with a smile and continuous joy. This revelation inspired me to believe and to envision myself as limitless (Williams, 2020). I was imbued with the spirit and energy to believe in the impossible. I had a paradigm shift from a negative state to a positive state, and this shift has made all the difference. I was rerouted to a path less traveled, but it is a path that should be traveled by many. It is a path that should be traveled by you.

My daunting and challenging path started when I left corporate America and my managerial role at Stock Building Supply, relinquishing my supervisory role of 61 adults, to instead manage consistently changing classrooms of K-8th grade students at a charter school in Wilson, North Carolina. I fell out of love with managing processes and manufacturing products, and I fell in love with inspiring youthful minds and future leaders. The inner teacher was born from this experience, but as I taught more and more minds. I realized there was something missing: I never felt satisfied. I grew curious and open to learning what drove people who seemed at peace with themselves. This curiosity compelled me to ask questions of the head of this charter and to ask about the benefits of her Ph.D. These questions sparked my interest in acquiring a doctorate degree.

A new path was created for me, even though I did not understand the difference between a doctorate and a Ph.D. I assumed that a doctorate degree would give me access to teaching at the university or college level. At that time, I did not consider the difference. I was driven to reach the highest level of education, driven to see how far I could stretch my mind, driven to venture into a new world, and driven to be better than my best. This meant I had to slay the dragon that stood in front of the pathway to the

completion of a dissertation (Williams, 2020). I often questioned myself and wondered if I was capable of completing this task. The truth is, I did not know at that time. I just knew that quitting was not an option once I decided to start on my doctoral path. My dissertation led me to study the origins of leadership and management concepts and theories while I pursued a doctorate in management/leadership organization at the University of Phoenix (UOP).

As I continued to climb my dissertation mountain, I learned that my doctorate degree would not give me access to conduct research and to teach at traditional land grant universities. However, it did give me the rare opportunity to share the graduation stage with my wife (e.g., completed her master's degree) in 2010 in Raleigh, NC at our commencement ceremony. My UOP experience motivated me to believe in myself, realizing that I could conduct research and teach at the collegiate level. I also met a great mentor who encouraged me to pursue my Ph.D. in Hospitality Management: Dr. Chris Roberts. He sold me on a vision to become a tenured professor and expressed what it would mean to be a Black professor in this unfamiliar world of academia (Williams, 2020).

There is a small percentage of Black professors in hospitality academics, less than five percent to be exact. Dr. Roberts made me feel honored and humbled because he saw qualities in me that I never considered and that I didn't know existed. He encouraged me to pursue a Ph.D. at Iowa State University (ISU) and to connect with the chair of the department, Dr. Bob Bosselman. Dr. Bob persuaded me to contemplate taking some classes as a non-degree-seeking student, in the hopes of earning a scholarship. I was scared to matriculate into another doctorate program, more specifically a Ph.D. program, and to leave North Carolina to head to Iowa – the unknown Midwest. I had to face my fear because I knew that joy awaited me on the other side (Williams, 2020). This taught me to walk towards fear and embrace the unknown with valor and optimism. I was able to utilize this energy to graduate in two years after ISU administrators accepted previous doctoral courses that eliminated a year of course work.

My path spurred me to evaluate my past leadership experiences as an athlete and as a professional, so I conducted research that focused on those two variables. More specifically, I constructed a dissertation titled, *The Impact of Youth Sports on Leadership Styles in the Hospitality Industry*. I worked on this study for six months and fell in love with perusing and vetting articles, collecting and analyzing data, and summarizing the findings. I found my scholarly voice and my direction as a future professor; I would continue conducting research around leadership topics and teach human resource management, law, sports management, and leadership courses. I would also employ the acquired knowledge and experiences to speak to business leaders, domestically

and internationally. This was my unique path that I would intentionally travel with confidence and sustained joy.

I believe we are all privy to this unique and, in many ways, untapped path. We must be willing to look back and examine our signposts and strength codes that will enable us to see limitless possibilities. Our minds expand, and our paths are built to align with the unseen visions in our minds. I went from an imposter to a believer, from a thug to a scholar. Are you willing to unmask your greatest potential? Are you willing to embark on the road less traveled? Are you willing to take this journey to your Ph.D.? Only you can answer these questions, so I hope you realize the answer lies deep inside of you. This path is hard but extremely rewarding and doable. It is rewarding because we have the opportunity to promote and incite critical and creative thought in future leaders. We also have the ability to build global citizenship while serving as mentors, such as Dr. Roberts and Dr. Bob. It is doable because millions of people have walked this similar path and millions more will walk it in the future. We need to look in the mirror at the only person that matters and believe, telling ourselves every day that we will be the one that sparks the brain that changes the world. Be limitless and just do it (Williams, 2020)!

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