Through education I have gained an ever changing perspective of the world around me by being introduced to new ideas, technology, and global issues. This is true of my experience with the Master of Educational Technology program (MAET). My journey with the MAET program began in the summer of 2009. I had completed my bachelors degree five years prior and felt like it was the right time in my life to continue my formal education. I was the first in my family to complete a bachelors degree and decided that I did not want to stop there. It also became apparent to me that if I wanted to advance in my career it would be necessary to continue my formal education. I took quite a bit of time examining masters programs from Public Policy to Human Resources. Although these programs had a few courses that would be beneficial for my future employment goals, they were not quite the right fit for me at the time.

When I came upon the MAET program I was pleased to find many courses that would be helpful in my current employment in the field of Higher Education as well as provide the skills needed to further my career as a Financial Aid Administrator. I actually started with a list of approximately 30 courses that I wanted to take, but only 10 were required for the program. It was challenging to narrow them down so I had to consider what my immediate goals were. These goals were to improve skills in research, data visualization, and improve educational experience for my students. Through speaking with the director of my department I found that a primary responsibility in an advanced position would require the ability to interpret and conduct research. In my profession, as well as in many others, communicating to those in positions of influence, such as a board or the consumer, is often done through quantitative means. The topic of communication may vary from how successful the department was in completing tasks to the average amount of loan indebtedness of a student graduating from the institution. In order to gather this information and interpret it accurately I was in need of building upon the basic skills learned in my undergraduate education.

Secondly, I met with my advisor, Leigh Graves Wolf, to communicate my goals and interests. She was a great listener and recommended courses that fit perfectly to bring me closer to my educational goals. I described that I wanted to learn more about taking data and representing it in a visually appealing manner. Leigh introduced me to coursework in data visualization that would teach me precisely that. After taking my director and advisors advice, as well as reflecting upon what I really hoped to gain I came up with a list of courses that were very diverse, but were an excellent fit for what I had hoped to learn through a masters program.

Research

Coursework in CEP 822 Approaches to Educational Research taught by Nick Sheltrown and EAD 942 Economic Analysis in Educational Policy Making taught by Amita Chudgar were key in developing research skills, learning important terminology, and opening a world of data analysis that have already proven to be helpful in my current employment. These courses have sparked my interest in gathering information, reading research, and have created ideas in areas of research I would like to investigate in the future. College accessibility and economic concerns of loan indebtedness have become a
passion of mine. Through CEP 822 I was able to learn how to narrow down a specific research question, review literature pertaining to the question, analyze data, and come to a final conclusion. My question in this course was “How Many Students are Leaving College Early Due to Education Loan Indebtedness?”. This question is of great concern to me as a financial aid administrator as I witness students struggling to enroll each semester due to financial hardship and see the decrease in grant funding creating further reliance on student loans. Through my action research paper I was glad to read that others had conducted research in this area and share my concerns, but there is definitely room for further investigation. It opened my eyes to which populations are most affected by education loan indebtedness, borrower mentality, and recommendations for schools in implementing debt management education or tools that can assist students in making the right decisions.

In EAD 942 I was introduced to terminology relative to quantitative research. Professor Chudgar introduced the class to cost-benefit and production function analysis that are used in many industries. A primary objective in the course was to examine how it is possible to integrate these analyses into the field of education. Sharing an anecdote may be helpful, but having quantified data to support the issue at hand often proves increasingly powerful. We also looked at the struggle in the field of education as there are many attributes that can be difficult to quantify. We discussed these topics as we reviewed research that had been conducted. Prior to each class we read several journal articles relating to an educational policy including teacher-student ratio, human capital, the correlation between various inputs of education and their affects on student achievement. For each subject there were a variety of articles. Some were in support and others were in opposition of the policy being discussed. When we met as a group we reviewed the research strategies used in the articles and shared our thoughts about the conclusions or correlations that were made. Professor Amita Chudgar was excellent in moderating the discussion and bringing up important variables that should be considered that may have been excluded from the research. I would consider this to be my most eye opening course in regard to socioeconomic inequalities in education which tie to my interests in college accessibility. I gained so much from this course and I am very thankful that, although I am not currently in a PhD program and this course is typically a course for PhD students, I was allowed to participate.

One opportunity that I love about my field is that I have the opportunity to participate in membership of regional committees that work closely with legislators to advocate for college financial aid programs. Just a few weeks ago I had the opportunity to attend the Midwest Association of Student Financial Aid Administrators conference where we had the opportunity to voice our concerns to the president of the National Association of Student Financial Aid Administrators who then can take the information back to his policy researchers and lobbyists to bring about change. One of the concerns he brought up was that financial aid administrators often bring up issues with policy, but they do not often back it with quantified data. For example, a common complaint in my field is that a new policy will be created for a grant program. It will require months and months of training, updating software, and communicating the new rules to parents and students to then have the rule reversed the next aid year. In order to share this concern with
legislators and to make a case for change he mentioned that it would be extremely beneficial to have quantified data to demonstrate how many hours and dollars were spent implementing these changes. Through CEP 822 and EAD 942 I now have the skills to gather this data. I still have much to learn about conducting research, but I have the foundation and plan to study this further in the future.

Data Visualization

The course that opened up the world of data visualization to me was JRN 338 taught by Karl Gude. Karl shared examples of compelling work that were an alternative to telling stories with words or basic graphs and pie charts. We learned how to use multiple tools in the Adobe Creative Suite to take data and create a design for print and the web. For example, rather than tell a news story about an accident through words he shared graphics that gave a view of what happened in the accident that were created through software such as Adobe Illustrator.

The reason that this skill was intriguing to me as an educator was that on a daily basis part of my job is to share complex information about financial aid, interest rates, and loan limits with students and their families. As we know, not all students learn the same way and many would increase their learning potential with a visual to aid in understanding. I wanted to be able to create graphics that could be used on financial literacy programs offered through our office. I also wanted to use this skill in future research endeavors. Rather than communicate the results of a quantitative analysis through words I now have the ability to create visually appealing graphics which may make the information easier to understand, particularly for those who may not have prior knowledge of the financial aid process or of the data being represented.

Karl was very inspiring. He has significant experience in this field and made each course interesting. I looked forward to each project, whether it was a print ad that we were creating or our final flash project. Not only did I learn a lot about multimedia, I also gained from experiencing his teaching methods and how to become a more engaging educator. He was relevant, enthusiastic, and had a clear passion for what he was teaching.

Improving Educational Experiences for My Students

My classroom is not a typical classroom. Sometimes teaching occurs over a phone call, an e-mail, my cubicle, or a conference room. My students are college students, parents, or my colleagues. My undergraduate education was in Social Studies and Elementary Education. Although I am not working in K-12 education it amazes me how often I used my education in my daily conversations and communications.

Since my topic (financial aid) can be very dull, boring, and sometimes depressing, I wanted to learn more about how I could better engage my students. A course that introduced me to strategies that would allow me to better achieve this was CEP 882 The Nature and Design of Compelling Experiences taught by David Wong. We took a deep
look into fields that are known for creating a positive user experience including photography, filmmaking, interior design, and music. After reviewing each type of media we thought about how we could apply attributes associated with making media a compelling experience into education. Media Arts often draws a person in through attraction. It is engaging and often suspenseful. These are all attributes that can be considered when creating a lesson that can improve the educational experience making it more memorable for the student.

Along with the attributes, we considered how to integrate these types of media into the classroom. In order to create anticipation for a movie, film companies create a movie trailer highlighting key plot points that leave the audience wanting more. In my blog created for this course I discussed the use of trailers as an anticipatory set for upcoming units. It could be a video clip, a photograph, a skit that is shared with the class prior to the lesson to gain their attention that includes elements that would be in a movie trailer. I am looking forward to applying ideas such as this to future presentations or training opportunities and hoping to receive a more positive response in spite of the negative connotations that are tied to the topic of financial aid.

In Conclusion

Thanks to the coursework taken through the MAET program my eyes are open to educational issues outside of my local community, technological tools that can help break down barriers, and the skills needed to gather research to advocate for issues such as college accessibility. I am thankful for the people that I have met through this program including classmates, faculty, and others interested in improving accessibility for higher education. Since many people do not plan at an early age to pursue a career as a Financial Aid Administrator there are not specific educational programs developed for study within this field. I appreciate the MAET program for providing the opportunity to develop a plan of coursework with a knowledgable advisor that was individualized and appropriate to reach my educational goals. I leave this journey excited to continue learning and with a new set of tools to become a better educator.