1. What did you do/accomplish?
2. What did you learn (about leadership, about yourselves, about emotional intelligence, or anything along those lines)?

My goal for this leadership project was to improve my department’s annual magazine Spotlight, which “spotlights” some of the research and outreach that our students and faculty do. The department as a whole puts a lot of effort and funding into producing and distributing this publication, but its purpose or intentions have never really been made explicit and just in general there is always room for improvement as far as elements like design. My goals for the leadership project were to obtain feedback from the department on what the intended purpose, audience, and distribution goals of the magazine should be.

This year I was the assistant coordinator and next year I’ll be in charge, so I wanted to get ideas on the specifics of what needs to be improved before I really get started. To do that, I met several times with the current coordinator to brainstorm how to make minor and major improvements, and we corresponded with other people in the department for information. Those brainstorming sessions have provided me with lots of ideas going forward, but for now I’ve focused on distributing an online survey to obtain feedback from the department regarding the magazine that will help us determine where to focus our efforts. The survey went out last week, and we’ll review the results once we close it, but we’ve also already implemented some important changes. For example, we moved the release date earlier to coincide with our annual departmental symposium to get it out to a broader audience earlier, and we’ve also gotten the magazine up on the department’s website in digital form as a resource.

As far as what I learned from this project, I’ve learned that working backwards or beginning with the end in mind are essential to getting a task done. My goal was to get the survey out in the timeframe of the Academy and I did, which is great, but we also did a lot of other work that I think would’ve distracted from that intention if I hadn’t been really clear and systematic about it from the beginning (i.e., the SMART chart activity was helpful!) The academy in general confirmed in my mind that self-improvement is a never-ending journey and I’ve been exposed to a lot of new ideas and resources to pursue once it’s over.

One of the reasons I applied for this Leadership Academy was because I was feeling somewhat lost in my PhD program - I felt it wasn’t really providing me with the tools to be a healthy and generally useful citizen. I think it’s easy for students to center their identity in their graduate programs and forget about the bigger picture. The academy served to affirm my views that “the struggle is real” in the sense that most graduate students feel overwhelmed or confused at some point in their academic careers, but this academy has been a reminder that there are lots of resources out there to learn or remember your purpose and how to hold on to that intrinsic motivation. Overall, I’ve found the academy to be a very motivational and positive experience.