

Letter to the Co-Editors

Dear Dr. Robbins and Dr. Shaffer:

As I strive to publish an article based on my dissertation, I also feel that it is important to share my personal journey—my journey as a full-time academic advisor, part-time doctoral student, and novice researcher. It is my hope that the knowledge I gained along the way may be beneficial to others like me.

Before going on vacation, you typically have an itinerary for your trip—where you plan to stay, what you plan to do. Common wisdom suggests that when you begin a doctoral program you have an idea of what your dissertation topic will be so that you can explore that topic through class projects and papers as you progress. This was not the case for me. As a full-time academic advisor and part-time student, I was only able to manage course work and the work for which I got paid. I wasn't able to also think about my dissertation topic. All I knew was that I wanted to focus my topic on academic advising. This is the equivalent of saying "I'm going to vacation in Europe"—you have a general, very large area in mind, but no specific destination.

Once you settle on a topic, the literature can often dictate your direction. What literature is out there? Has the study you want to undertake already been done? Here is where many students fall prey to what my dissertation advisor called "the seduction of the literature." I would read an article that would give me an idea and I would start off in that direction, gathering articles on a particular topic that I would ultimately never use. You may also find that you come up with great ideas for research projects that have nothing to do with your chosen topic. Make a note of these great ideas and return to them later, once you have completed your dissertation.

You can no longer avoid the inevitable—you must write something. Normally, you will write the first three chapters of your dissertation—the introduction, literature review, and methods section and then defend that proposal to a committee. The committee will accept your proposal and off you go to gather your research. My committee decided at my proposal defense that they did not like my research questions. I had planned to use the upcoming NACADA conference to conduct many of my interviews, saving money on travel expenses. Imagine traveling a great distance and arriving at a beautiful hotel only to find out that they do not

have your reservation and that they have no available rooms. After some complaining and crying, I made some adjustments and re-defended my proposal—after the NACADA conference.

Now comes the fun part—gathering your research. If you choose to do a qualitative study, you will likely work with people. I had the amazing opportunity to visit five different advising offices across the country and meet academic advisors. As advisors, we are lucky to work in a field where people are welcoming and so willing to answer seemingly random questions. Sure, I had to foot the expense of traveling—for gas and hotels, including the costs to cover a 2-day delay because of an ice storm—but the experience was well worth it.

The next step in your journey is analysis—finding out the results of your study. If you are doing a quantitative study and are a novice, you may want to enlist the help of a statistician. Many universities have such people available to help you—some for free. Qualitative research often employs interviews, which require transcription. I transcribed each interview (a task you must include in your planning schedule), which is a very time-consuming process. You can also pay someone to do this for you, but you will still need to review the transcripts, fill in any blanks, and re-read them for the coding process.

Once you transcribe, code, and analyze, you can write your results section. This is simply the report of the information you found. As you write, you may find that you want to insert your opinion into the results. However, now is not the time for you to have an opinion! Go ahead and write down your idea and save it for the discussion section—the final section of your dissertation; this is where you get to share your opinions and ideas. You may also want to make some recommendations related to your study and to give some suggestions for future research.

I've included some tips that I hope will be helpful to anyone who wants to conduct research and write up the results:

- Narrow your topic idea when beginning a program so that you can develop it as you take courses.
- Do a thorough review of the research, but don't get seduced by the literature—you need to write eventually.
- Keep an annotated bibliography. Go ahead

and cite the source in proper form, include a brief summary, and most important, discuss how the source relates to your study. This is a large amount of work up-front but will save you a large amount of time in the long run.

- Keep a research journal—track ideas, questions, thoughts, and reflections on your activities and findings. This will be especially important when you need to keep pushing the project aside for more pressing priorities. The journal can reacquaint you with the project and more quickly help you pick up where you left off. This makes it a good tool for both qualitative and quantitative projects.
- Don't give up. At times you will question your sanity, but finishing your project will be something of which you can always be proud.
- If you are writing your dissertation, find a writing buddy—someone who is near or at the same stage in the process as you are. Your

family and colleagues will likely be very supportive, but only someone going through the same process as you are will be able to understand what you are going through.

I wrote this letter so advisors will know that it is possible to earn your PhD while working full-time. It takes persistence and a lot of hard work. Did I mention persistence? I hope that my dissertation story may help you on your own dissertation journey. Imagine sitting on the beach (or your favorite, relaxing vacation spot), reading books for fun (instead of for research), no projects hanging over your head, and having a great sense of accomplishment. It is a long, arduous trip, but well worth it.

Sincerely,

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