Improving Information-Seeking Behaviors and Knowledge Bases for
Thesis Students in the Applied Behavior Analysis Graduate Program and
Students in the Rehabilitation and Mental Health Counseling Graduate Program

Video 15:   Starting a Research Agenda

When choosing a research problem to study, there are many points to consider.

First, does the research question relate in some way to previous research, to a method, which with you are familiar, or technique you already have in a 'toolbox.'

Second, does it require new technology? Perhaps there is a new statistical modeling software or a new methodology that you will need to learn. If so, how much time do you need to become conversant with the technology, software, or methodology? You may need to identify other faculty or staff who are experts in the area and see if they are open to mentor or to collaborate with you.

Third, is it a 'hot topic'? A research question may be based on an area that is the current buzz word in the field or a new funding opportunity. This has pros and cons. The pros are obvious. Emergent topics allow you to catch the wave when it is still small and ride it out as it increases in size in the research community. Funding will also be available as it becomes even 'hotter.' The cons are that 10,000 other people also want to ride on that same wave. Also, the interest in the area may burn out as quickly as it emerged and funding disappears.

Fourth, there is the issue of collaboration. If you are a beginning researcher, you need to establish your own research identity. It may take a while to build a name for yourself as a researcher in your own right in a field if your co-authors are better known.

Collaboration can also be time-consuming. Coordinating schedules and personalities may be time-consuming. The pros, again, are obvious. Working with others, you can create more complex projects and be realistic about what you can actually accomplish. It also allows you to build teams

that have the strengths to pull the project off, not having to be expert in all aspects of a research area or techniques.

These are some of the questions that you need to realistically examine when selecting an area of research and establishing work and other collaborative relationships.

Let's say you have decided upon an area of research and collaborators. What do you need to do to succeed?

First, it is important to have uninterruptible blocks of time set aside every week. During this time, there are numerous activities that can help get you into 'research mode.'

Familiarize yourself with previous work from the literature and critically examine method, including reliability and validity, transferability, and generalizability. Now is the time to learn what academic resources are available, such as databases, journals, and books, as well as new tools to keep you in 'the loop', such as e-alerts and automated search techniques that deliver weekly results to your mailbox from a variety of sources.

Determine your personal style of working, for example, are you a one project at a time person or do you prefer to have multiple irons in the fire?

Write something every week. It may not be Pulitzer or Nobel Prize quality material, but writing every week gets you into the habit of reflective and reflexive thought, critical in the synthesis and integration of new information into your research. The key is to always have something in preparation, something out for review, something in revision, and something accepted. As soon as one item is out for review, start the next.

Consider taking a time or project management class to improve your skills. It is never too late to learn tips and techniques, tools and methods, to make you more efficient and effective at juggling many irons.

Second, start with a long view of a research question. This includes study design, literature review, data collection, data analysis, materials, equipment, space, personnel, and time.

Then, using project management techniques create short-term objectives to chunk the big picture into smaller, more manageable pieces. Then closely examine the smaller chunks from the perspective of each chunk being a discrete research component with a publishable paper when the research for that chunk is completed.

Some of the most successful research agendas have been created that way, establishing a niche for the researcher as well as a springboard to related or innovative projects. Like Rome, research agendas are not built in a day but through methodical progress, one project at a time, one paper at a time that lead to a coherent whole.

Third, establish yearly goals for publications, presentations, and grants. Sending two articles a year for review is a good, and manageable, start. If you are unsure where to publish, contact us and we will be happy to show you how to assess and evaluate journals. Keeping to the 'times-two' rule, present at two conferences a year. Try for national and international conferences as well as established regional conferences. In addition to the presentation, conferences are a great place to network and to establish professional relationships for the external reviewers required for promotion and tenure packages.

Become conversant with the grant cycle deadlines. If you have a 6-month lead time, talk to the program officer, write the grant, get feedback from colleagues, make revisions, and have plenty of time left to move it through the academic sign-off process from the Chair, Dean, and Office of Research (build in at least four weeks for that).

Fourth, establish your timelines. Although many academics live by the semester rule, we suggest that it is better to think about your target conferences and set up your projects around them. By the time the next year rolls around, your research is at a state where you can present it. Also re-examine your research achievements, e.g., at the end of every month or perhaps quarter. Semester and yearly reviews often create a sense of 'I've got plenty of time', which can be fatal to forward movement on projects.

Set yourself weekly goals, such as 'update the lit review'. Set up e-alerts for journal tables of contents and automatic searches in the databases critical to your field/area of research. Set up grants e-alerts. Read the papers you found in the lit review. Learn how to use a citation management system. Create 5- and 10-minute spots for your research to talk about with other researchers and non-researchers. Join a listserv that announces conferences and publishing opportunities. Talk to the

research and subject-specialist librarians. Spend time (virtually or physically) in the library. There are always new tools and toys.

Fifth, if you have a teaching assignment, connect your classes into your research. Use books and articles relevant to what you are researching in the class. Create exercises around research questions. Set up a journal club with your students. This keeps you current with what they are studying with you as well as with other researchers. Have librarians come to class and show everyone the new tools of the trade and how to be better and more efficient at finding relevant research.

There are numerous other ideas on how to create a research agenda. Summarize key research issues and methods in conferences you attend for discussion with other researchers and students. Journaling is a good technique for researchers, whether it is paper or electronic. Jot down ideas wherever you are and review them later. Who knows what new areas of study may emerge or the answer to a vexing methodological problem.

Talk with your chair or Dean about the possibility of creating mini-research seminars where faculty can discuss work-in-progress as well as receive critiques and input from colleagues. Seek out service on grant and program evaluation panels. Webinars are a good way to keep current and save on travel. Federal agencies sponsor webinars frequently at little or no-cost. Get on their mailing lists. Develop a group of colleagues who are willing to review and edit your work.

Finally, a word to the prepared. Keep copies of everything **AS YOU GO**. Create a folder or file drawer dedicated to everything you write, present, or create for class, whatever it is you need to have for your promotion or tenure package. Put copies in electronic and paper files. Update your vita for each publication, presentation, service, grant, etc. as soon as it is done. Do NOT do a yearly update. You will forget something.

We leave you with a final postscript. Use your local library. Librarians are here to help you get started. We can show you how to set up e-alerts, from tables of contents to lit searches to grants updates. We can show you how to maximize your time when performing a lit review, setting up citation management programs, and citing 'while you write.' Please feel free to email us at FmhiLibrary@usf.edu for assistance.