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August, 2005

ELEMENTS OF CREDIBLE RESEARCH

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Available at: https://works.bepress.com/charles_g_eberly/5/

ELEMENTS OF CREDIBLE RESEARCH¹

Charles G. Eberly

The author presents basic concepts of research methods for a non research-focused audience and a rationale for supporting credible research on the college fraternity/sorority experience.

The task of identifying the elements of credible research in ten minutes is a bit like asking me to summarize the past thirty years of my life. There is so much to share and so little time to share it.

Rationale for Research. I will work from the perspective of social science research in college student affairs. I suspect that many of you have encountered "researchers" who appear to have ulterior motives and you have become suspicious of the underlying intentions of most researchers. You may feel like the majority of Native Americans who, upon encountering researchers in their midst, say, "If you are here to rob me or save me, then no thanks; if you have come to understand me, then I welcome you" (R. Roberts, personal communication, October 9, 2002).

Your role as gatekeepers to undergraduate students within your organizations makes it imperative that you ask researchers what position and or biases they bring to the table with their proposal. Researchers should be clear about their reasons for wanting to carry out their research (Macmillan & Schumacher, 2001). They should be able to explain without hesitation the purposes for their research, their position with regard to why they want to do the research proposed, and the potential benefits of their research for stakeholder audiences. In fact, most researchers must have their rationale well developed since most if not all institutions of higher education require proposals to be submitted to an Institutional Review Board (IRB) for peer review prior to implementation (Marshall, 2003).

Methodology. Beyond explaining how they have come to want to do the study, why the research is needed, and what potential benefits of the research might be, the methodology to be used should be clearly articulated, including any anticipated limitations. The researcher should be able to advise you of expected results of the study, and the kinds of results that are beyond the scope of their study.

In our society, we have a methodological bias, a fascination if you will, toward the idea of experimental research, often conceiving research as some sort of pre-test, treatment, post-test type of design (Campbell & Stanley, 1963). However, there are many other types of research designs such as qualitative methods, including ethnographic studies that may be far more connected to the ideas we wish to address as value-added organizations (Shank, 2002). For example, a project employing an experimental design will not help us to understand the reasons that students elect to haze certain members of their organization. An experimental design would

¹ This article is based on a speech given by the author to the 100th Anniversary Convention of the National Panhellenic Conference, Oakbrook, IL on October 11, 2002.

only tell us which groups are likely to haze under what conditions; it will not help us understand individual or group motivations. The job of the researcher is to explain her/his methodology in a clear fashion so that you can make the association between the purposes of the research, the methodological approach by which the study will be carried out, and the value of the research to the field of study.

Disclosure to Participants. First, the researcher should prepare a memorandum of agreement with the stakeholders clearly indicating the purposes of the research and the limitations of its possible outcomes. Secondly, the research proposal should provide an explanation for the purposes of the study to each research participant, together with an informed consent document to be signed by the participants acknowledging they have voluntarily agreed to participate in the research, and that they can withdraw their data at any time (Macmillan & Schumacher, 2001).

The researcher's IRB will be very specific in dictating the language of consent forms and research instructions (see http://www.eiu.edu/~grants/COMP_IRB.php). Ultimately, when IRB regulations come in conflict with pre-existing guidelines such as National Panhellenic Conference Research Committee recommendations, the IRB commentary will have greater influence on how and if research is approved on a campus. Researchers and fraternity/sorority professionals and volunteers contemplating a research project must abide by the federal regulations governing research on human subjects.

Results. When you receive the report of results from the researcher, the document should be organized around the methodology used to carry out the study. Special caution should be noted by the researcher relative to the use of any findings used to generalize or apply results to other times, other groups, or other situations.

Conclusions that are not based on the study's methodology or data should be rejected. It is understood that any research produced should not compromise the confidentiality of the campus, the specific groups, or individual students within the groups without their express permission.

Peer Review. Another element of good research is that it holds up to peer review. Research available in good quality professional journals, such as the *Journal of College Student Development*, the *NASPA Journal*, the *Journal of College Student Retention* (and now *Oracle: The Research Journal of the Association of Fraternity Advisors*) must first be peer reviewed by a panel of professionals in the field who recommend to the editor whether an article should be published, rejected, or modified. The review process often takes up to ten months or more before an article is published in a journal. Even then, the article must wait for an appropriate theme and/or until there is space in the journal for it to be printed. Based on personal experience, from the time an article is first submitted to a journal until it reaches the readership of that publication can be as long as eighteen months.

The purpose of the peer review is to help eliminate poor research from publication, and to provide helpful advice to the researchers as they work to convey their results to a broader audience. Furthermore, the purpose of publishing the research is to open its content to criticism by the readership itself. Readers, primarily peers of the authors in their field of scholarship, may be critical of the research purposes, methodology, statistical treatment, results, and conclusions.

A key objective is to develop subsequent research that improves upon the current published research. It is the cumulative results of many research projects that result in noticeable gains in knowledge. Like worker bees in a hive, the results of one bee's (researcher's) work is small in relation to the overall productivity of the hive.

Scientific versus Intuitive Knowledge. There are many "ways of knowing," and the scientific method is only one method of inquiry. The fact that a project is conducted using the scientific method does not of itself make the project entirely credible. We also have our own experiential knowledge of a topic that ought not to be ignored as a source of information. A balance should be sought between scientific findings and our own intuitive knowledge of a topic. As we seek such a balance, we will very likely discover those points where we experience a dissonance between the formal research findings and our experiential knowledge. That dissonance is particularly useful at the moment one asks, "How can these results be used in practice?" What we have previously thought of as fact now becomes a question. Such questions enable us to approach the topic under study with a fresh perspective and may propel us forward to do more complete or thorough research that builds upon prior knowledge with new facts and new experiences.

Goals of Research. As research is considered, the goal of the research is paramount. Is the purpose for reasons of judgment, program development or improvement, or increasing general knowledge on a topic (Cherry, 2000)? I suspect that many observers in the general public conceive research from the point of view of judgment alone. However, few research projects are designed to make a final evaluative decision. In fact, most research projects are focused upon program development or program improvement. Many are focused upon increasing general knowledge about some often vexing issue.

Program development research addresses learning about the behavioral impact of current programming and identifying what elements might be altered to increase the potential benefit of that impact. Research used for program improvement can be called "formative," whereas research to determine the worth or value of a thing is termed "summative" (Macmillan & Schumacher, 2001). Much program evaluation research is misinterpreted as summative when it is best used as formative. I suspect that is what happens with a good deal of fraternity and sorority related research. Negative outcomes in a project should not be taken to suggest that the entire project should be destroyed. On the contrary, negative outcomes may be indicative of problematic programs in need of change. We learn as much if not more from negative findings as we do from positive findings.

Facing Our Fear of Research Results. As with medieval kings, occasionally the messenger with sad news is beheaded, even though the sad news must be addressed despite the King's distaste at hearing it. I suspect that we are all aware that college fraternities and sororities have an "image problem" in the popular media.

I am willing to assert that it is not the "research image" of our organizations that affects the number and quality of new members we acquire, but rather the "media image." Under what conditions do you hear strangers refer to fraternities or sororities? Is the public image of our value-added organizations based on research outcomes, or more on popular movies such as

"Animal House," "Higher Education," "Old School," or depictions of sorority life on MTV? Is a group of unnamed college students lounging on a porch and drinking simply referred to as a group of students, or is the comment more sarcastic, perhaps, "Look at them! I wonder what fraternity THAT is?!" without the speaker having any knowledge of whether the group of students is part of a fraternity or not. In short, our undergraduate as well as alumni behavior over the past decades belies our protestations about a value-added experience to augment the formal undergraduate curriculum. Our frustration with the media may spill over to include researchers and research, thus killing the messenger that may help us reframe and revitalize our organizations for the 21st century.

At the 2001 Association of Fraternity Advisor's Annual Meeting, a list of research questions dealing with issues in the fraternity movement was generated by the participants (Center for the Study of the College Fraternity, 2002). If we were to be able to carry out even a small number of the studies suggested, what could we learn about working with undergraduate students and chapters that we do not presently understand? What insights might we develop if we were willing to be freely examined? I recently read of an older woman who was very modest and unwilling to let the physician remove her blouse so he could examine her chest (Charleston Times-Courier, September, 2002). When the nurse finally convinced her to let the physician examine her, the doctor found a weeping sore with a tumor the size of a baseball. The woman had advanced cancer yet denied that anything was wrong with her. What cancers in our system do we deny? Alternatively, what strengths or benefits of fraternity/sorority membership do we not espouse?

Perhaps the question to address in permitting undergraduates to participate in sanctioned research projects is: "What is the goal of the research for me as a fraternity official?" I submit that we have much to learn about how we work with undergraduate students and alumni, how we understand the contemporary undergraduate experience, and how we develop programming that both supports the value-added concept of our organizations and addresses the wider social problems that undermine our efforts. For example, what preventive measures will effectively address the "culture of alcohol" that impedes our success on campus after campus (Wechsler, 2001)? What can research tell us that we do not yet realize? How may we systematically learn from our mistakes so that we do not naively repeat them? How may we learn from our successes so that we can multiply them? I submit that by working together through systematic research efforts, we have the potential to transform the fraternity and sorority of the twentieth century into one of the leading forces for social change in the twenty-first century. Borrowing from Dr. Seuss, "Our mountain is waiting, now get on your way" (Seuss, 1990).

Postlude

Since this paper was first read in 2002, the Center for the Study of the College Fraternity has worked cooperatively with the Research Committee of the National Panhellenic Conference to develop a web site (http://www.npcwomen.org/about/an_research.php) for researchers wishing to obtain NPC sanction for their research proposal dealing specifically with issues related to women's collegiate organizations. The web site provides researchers with guidelines for submitting proposals, and suggests topics the NPC Research Committee is most likely to

encourage. Because of the web site, the process necessary to review and approve proposals in support of quality research on the fraternity/sorority experience will be markedly enhanced.

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