

Surviving the Doctoral Research Process

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There are many things people say when you first announce your intent to complete a doctoral degree: “Congratulations!” “Wow, that’s a lot of work!” “Will you make more money?” “Are you looking for a career change?” The first kind of response is expected. You even expect to hear the questions around salary increase and job prospects, particularly if you are completing your degree and working in your chosen field already. While I never imagined that it would be difficult to explain, I still find questions about my research challenging to answer. The challenge is two-fold; first, it can be difficult to explain the research process in general. Concepts such as proposal defense, IRB, or advancement to candidacy are unique to the doctoral process and these milestones can seem trivial to those who have not experienced them. Second, and perhaps the greatest challenge, is explaining why you want to complete a doctoral program at all. In a field that is often misunderstood, boiled down to sorority recruitment or social events, a terminal degree can be seen as unnecessary. For those who choose the terminal path, this piece offers a advice I have found to be critical in staying the course.

To provide some context, I should share that I am currently a Doctoral Candidate in Educational Studies, with a focus in Development and Learning Sciences. I found very quickly when I said that to someone, the responses were varied, but most commonly ended with a smile and a nod, to which I found myself politely smiling and nodding in return. Usually, at some point in the conversation, you are asked THE question – “What is your research?” – and then the conversation gets even more interesting. You see, my study title is “Identity Status and Alcohol Use.” I usually try to begin with a more formal explanation, and then finally find myself breaking it down to say I am trying to understand how and why students who seemingly have it all together (grades, co-op, leadership positions) end up choosing to be black out drunk for days at a time. The phenomenon of the high functioning alcoholic is not a new one in higher education, but most research thus far has been focused on graduate or professional students, disregarding our undergraduate populations almost entirely. Unfortunately, while people are often very interested and see the value of the study, I have also gotten a variety of responses in relation to my career – summarized essentially by saying the general opinion is working in fraternity and sorority life gives me a great study population. A presumptuous opinion, from my perspective, but it is a sentiment that has truly shaped my research.

I hardly consider myself as an expert in this process, but there are three pieces of advice I would give to someone who is traveling this path. First, choose a topic that intersects rather than intertwines with your work. It is great if it can inform your practice, but know that some separation is actually a valuable thing. Working in Student Affairs is an awesome and unpredictable career, and I knew that this had the potential to impact my progress. I also knew I wanted to study identity development, and I wanted to understand how decision making took place in relation to various identity statuses. Admittedly, when I was determining what to study, I found myself first drawn only to those things that were directly in alignment with the fraternal

world. You get a wide range of advice when considering a research topic. Sometimes it can be difficult to distinguish the helpful from the not so helpful. One piece of advice I heard frequently, for example, was to use what was at your disposal. This makes sense. A study related to the fraternal community would ensure easy access to a participant pool and would draw parallels to better inform my work. What people do not tell you is that, while access and parallels may be a benefit, it can also be an incredible impediment.

When you are immersed in a topic in the way you need to be to get through a terminal degree, it can take over your life. There are moments when you *hate* it; when you question your sanity in pursuing the degree; and, when you just want to give up. When the topic is so closely related to your work and you cannot tell the difference, you rapidly find there is nowhere to go when you need a break. I would imagine that we would all agree, in a field like ours, a place for self-care is a must.

This ties directly into my second piece of advice which is, should you select something that is related, it is critical to remember that every time you read something new, see a presentation, or talk with a colleague, you do not have to integrate those new thoughts into your research. I am often inspired by colleagues when I hear from them at the AFA Annual Meeting or NASPA, or see a post in a community board and find myself wondering how that fits into my own work. While what you learn may fit, or help you think about things differently, narrow is better when working on your dissertation, and you have plenty of time after you finish to consider all of those other aspects. That does not mean your study should not or cannot draw parallels and inform your work. For me, some of the population will be a part of the fraternity/sorority community, but some will not. Ultimately, the results will inform the greater campus community in prevention and intervention efforts. In the end, it is certainly my hope that the results will help to support a healthier, safer campus overall; and if that means a healthier fraternity/sorority community I am all for it.

This brings me to my final piece of advice – finish the paper. I accept that people may think I am a little deluded when I call a dissertation a paper, but I do it intentionally. At the end of the day, no matter how many pages it is – and mine is currently 147 before results and implications – it is still one paper. It will define only one part of you, but it will never truly capture everything you will take from the process. You will have plenty of time to write many, many more when you are done!