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Doing Research and Writing About It: Suggestions for Financial Aid Administrators

By Jerry Sheehan
Davis

This article describes important reasons why financial aid administrators should do more research, and offers suggestions for writing research reports. The article was adapted from a presentation given at the 1991 NASFAA National Conference.

Doing research serves an important role in the personal growth and development of financial aid administrators. Research findings increase the administrators' knowledge of their programs and how they work; help them better understand the effects of their policies and practices; and change their attitudes about themselves, their jobs, and their profession. Publishing the research adds to the collective knowledge of the financial aid community and enhances its performance and productivity. This article offers some suggestions for doing research and writing research articles for publication.

One reason why financial aid administrators do so little (and publish even less) research is that many believe research involves the difficult tasks of reviewing the literature, setting up formal hypotheses, assembling mass quantities of numerical data, and analyzing the data through statistical tests. Research can involve these things, but it also can be less complicated.

What Is Research?

In the broadest of terms, research is the simple act of carefully observing some thing, situation or phenomenon to learn more about it and better understand it. The tools of formal research, sometimes called research methodology, merely provide guidance in some techniques of careful observation so that the observations are as accurate as possible and the conclusions reached from them are reasonable and valid. If one can look carefully and objectively at some phenomenon and see it as it is, one can do research.

There are many reasons for doing research—for carefully observing—but three are most important.

First, research increases the knowledge, responsibility and control that financial aid administrators have over the many problems and activities in their offices. If they don't really know how things work, they will find it very difficult to control or be responsible for them. One of the quickest ways to drive financial aid administrators to distraction and despair is to make them responsible for programs, policies, and practices they don't understand.

Second, research helps financial aid administrators understand the effects (both intended and unintended) of financial aid policies and practices. Since policies and practices move programs toward their goals, if their effect is unknown, it is impossible to modify them to reach program goals.

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Third, research or careful observation changes attitudes and beliefs. One learns that what was thought to be true is not, and grows from this knowledge. That research sometimes contradicts belief or assumptions is possibly one reason why so little research is done.

No one likes to be wrong, much less prove themselves wrong. But there is nothing inherently bad about *having been* mistaken about something. Everyone has made mistakes. However, it is not okay to continue to be mistaken if careful observation can correct an error. Financial aid administrators should have the courage to do research that might prove themselves mistaken. They will be better for it, as will the administration of their programs, and programs in general.

Choosing a Research Topic

It is difficult to provide financial aid administrators with a "menu" or list of topics to study, because their knowledge of their programs and their effects is diverse, as are the major concerns at their offices and campuses. There are, however, some broad categories of research topics worthy of attention. In many cases, the research done to address a particular problem or issue on a campus can be adapted to serve as the basis for a formal research paper.

First, financial aid administrators can study what they and their staff do, how they spend their time, and what effects are produced by their efforts. Thus, if an office must provide various kinds of services, such as counseling, work-study job placement, and financial aid awards, financial aid administrators can define and categorize these services and then count how many persons receive such services within a given time frame. The numbers of students receiving each service can be compared to the numbers for an earlier time period to discover trends. Is the staff serving more or fewer students? Is the staff offering more or fewer clients a specific kind of service? Is the demand for a certain service greater than the staff can meet, perhaps as evidenced by fewer numbers of aid awards made, fewer students counseled, or longer periods of time students must wait to be served?

Another category of research involves assessment of the effects of policies for awarding aid. For example, if the aid office had to cut the number of institutional grant awards to students, how did that affect enrollments? Did fewer students of some kind or characteristic enroll this year than last year? Did fewer students return to college this year? Did those who enrolled have to borrow more to compensate for lost grants?

A third category of research involves what is called policy analysis. One might want to examine the potential effects of removing home asset values from need analysis on the family contributions of aid applicants. Will (or did) Expected Family Contributions decrease substantially? For how many students? For which kinds of students? How will (or did) these changes affect financial need and, therefore, the demand for aid from the college's programs?

Regardless of what research topic is chosen, for publication purposes the topic should be relevant and important to the reading audience. Chances are, however, if a research topic has relevance for administration of financial aid programs, it will be of interest and value to

other members of the financial aid community. So a report or article on the topic and findings should be written and published.

Credibility

The first thing to strive for in a research report is credibility. For research to be credible, it must be logical and rational. What is counted, compared and contrasted, and analyzed must make sense to both the observer and those who will read and evaluate the research. What was carefully observed must be important to those who will read the research report.

To be credible, research must avoid broad conclusions regarding “cause and effect” relationships. When a statistical relationship between two variables or phenomena is discovered, it is tempting to conclude that one somehow “caused” the other. It is especially tempting to reach such a conclusion when a researcher firmly believes that one *should* “cause” the other. Many phenomena are *statistically* related but that doesn’t mean they are *causally* related. The relationships have to be logical and warrant assumptions about causation *and* they have to occur more frequently than they would due to mere chance.

Components of a Research Report

A research report should include an introduction, a review of the applicable literature, a description of the methodology, a presentation of the data, and a summary. The introduction should tell readers what the research intended to examine and why this particular topic deserves attention. If one is doing a research article for a professional journal, such as the *NASFAA Journal* or the *Journal of Higher Education*, the introduction should briefly describe how this research supplements or complements what is already known or has already been done on the topic.

This will require a “review of the literature.” If the topic is related to financial aid, one can use NASFAA’s *Annotated Bibliography on Student Financial Aid* and the *NASFAA Journal* for references. Another useful reference is *The Economic Value of Higher Education*, by Larry Leslie and Paul Brinkman, which provides an excellent summary of research findings on the effects of student aid on access, choice, and retention, and describes many ways others have studied various student aid issues. (A list of books this writer continually finds useful is offered in the bibliography at the end of this article.)

Literature reviews are necessary and helpful to research, even though they might sometimes be considered tedious. While the financial aid field is indeed often one of overwhelming printed information, articles and reports on financial aid research are relatively few in number. Therefore, collecting sources and reviewing what is available on a particular topic is not a difficult task.

Having described the research topic and its importance, the next step is to describe briefly the research methodology. Here readers should be told why it was appropriate to use a particular method to make the careful observations. For example, if the research involved a survey of students, briefly describe the survey, how it was administered, and to whom it was given. If data on student files were compared, describe what data elements were involved, for which students, and

how comparisons were made. Did the research involve looking at the same group at two points in time? Were two or more different student groups compared? Were differences in student applicant or recipient characteristics examined?

The description of the methodology should mention which statistical tests, if any, were used and why these were appropriate. If the research involved testing hypotheses, here is a good spot to list them. Any good research text describes the proper form for a hypothesis. They are statements or questions that have guided the research. They are often written in the form of "if-then" statements. For example, *if* financial aid is cut, *then* enrollments will decrease. Hypotheses tell readers what one was trying to measure. Research methods tell them how it was measured.

The next step is to describe what was learned. Clearly and carefully describe what numerical data were analyzed and what was learned from the analyses. If the report is for persons with limited knowledge of statistics, do not burden them with complicated statistical formulae. Simpler is nearly always better, but it is essential if potential readers are not statistically sophisticated. Sophisticated statistical techniques might have been used to analyze the data. But it is nearly always possible to describe the findings in a manner that readers can understand.

If the research data can be shown in graphic displays, then consider using graphs instead of tables. Sometimes in reports to senior campus administrators or the general public, tables *and* graphs can be used to describe the same phenomena, assuming that different readers will understand one better than the other. Two different means to describe identical phenomena should not be used in an article for a professional journal, but writers generally should use whatever works best in communicating their research findings.

The last part of the article should summarize what was concluded from all observations. Be careful that each conclusion is supported by the data. Writers sometimes base conclusions on information available to them but not described in their articles. Avoid this mistake. Stick to what was described in the article. Do not introduce extraneous information. For an article to be credible, conclusions must be supported by data or a description of what was observed. Otherwise, "conclusions" become merely "assertions."

The Final Stages

After writing the first draft of a research report, let it sit for a while. Then go back to it with a careful editor's eye. Edit for grammar, punctuation, spelling and all the other fundamentals.

Edit for style. Research journals all have particular styles. Follow them, but do not worry about matters of style until after the first draft has been completed.

Edit for length. Shorter is almost always better. Readers will be busy, so they will want to learn as much as possible in the fewest number of pages.

Edit for accuracy and completeness. Make sure all citations and references are correct. Make sure all columns and rows of data add up

and that the data “track” consistently from one table to another. For example, if the same students are described in different tables, the same numbers of students should appear in all of the tables (or an explanation should be offered for why the numbers are different).

Edit for clarity. Polish the article’s words, sentences, and phrases until they shine. Then, if at all possible, ask a colleague to read the draft for clarity and comprehension. A friendly critic of an unpublished article or undistributed report is always more helpful than an unfriendly critic of a published work. Do not be afraid of criticism.

All writers understand one important thing: writing begets more writing. The best way to learn to write research reports, or anything else, is to write, as much and as often as possible. Be determined and be patient with the learning process. Be serious about research and careful observation. And, as the sneaker commercial says, “Just do it.” ♦

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