

## Research Reflective Essay

Many different strategies were employed during this research project. Initially, my research process began by creating a concept map, the purpose of which was to visualize different lines of reasoning that I could then pursue. The theory literature direction was not immediately apparent, so a vital part of ironing out a research course was brainstorming with our Political Science and Public Policy Librarian, Emily Keller, my fellowship faculty mentor, Professor Rebecca Thorpe, and my fellow research fellowship student peers.

As the project proceeded, I began to research the qualitative aspect of my project. It began with me using multi-disciplinary search tools, like Google Scholar and JSTOR, in order to cover a broad range of foundational literature. Afterwards, I explored more specific literature by referencing other studies and articles that were cited in my initial articles and by using more specialize article databases and portals (like the ones found on UW's *Political Science and Public Policy: Primary Sources & Data* webpage). What really helped me with finding specific literature was identifying my geographical and timeframe units of analysis and searching with those in mind.

The quantitative research process was unfamiliar to me when I began, as I had never done any quantitative research prior to this project. This process required me to do two things: (1) contact a multitude of food banks across Washington State via email asking for their unpublished data, and (2) collecting all other socioeconomic variable data with the SimplyAnalytics application. After all this data was collected, I aggregated it into a database using Excel and R, and then proceeded with the actual regression analysis.

My research approach did not necessarily change as I progressed through the research process – I found myself having to *add* (rather than change) new approaches that I was previously unfamiliar with in order to achieve the ends I was seeking. Prior to this project, I only ever used general multi-disciplinary search tools for research. As I progressed, I found myself needing to *add* more specialized databases to my research, *add* personal data collection emailing methods, *add* quantitative data analytics applications, etc. Overall, this experience has taught me that a complete research process requires diversified research tools and methods – this often

means having to learn new skills and going out of one's comfort zone. Not only will I use these newly developed research strategies in future research – I will, most importantly, do my research with the knowledge that complete research requires diversification.

There were many times when I encountered roadblocks in my research, but there was always a work-around. For example, when I needed to measure certain variables that were fairly abstract, I looked through the works of previous researchers to see how they measured the variables. When I found that their proxies were not applicable to my own study (either because of my lack of access to certain data, or because it did not make theoretical sense), I created my own (e.g., nobody before me, as far as my research has revealed, defined food bank “success” as the amount of unduplicated households a food bank served monthly divided by a ZIP code's total population – I created this measure myself).

When there were certain difficulties with finding evidence and sources, I would (1) note the lack of this evidence in my paper, and (2) reroute and see if any other lines of reasoning or plans of action were equally valid and applicable. This is what happened when I was unable to identify a way of finding *zip code population food demand* data – I rerouted and created my “food bank success” measure instead.

When it came specific search techniques, I used Emily Keller's guide on database searching as a reference. I went back to my concept map, and broke it down into various keywords (e.g., “food bank success”, “food insecurity social capital”, “Washington State food insecurity”, “COVID-19 food banks”, etc.). This is where my identification of units of analysis and timeframe really became useful. In terms of thoroughness, I do not think I was as thorough as I could have been. I found myself so overwhelmed by the sheer number of directions I could explore, articles I could read, databases I could search, that I was initially a bit disorganized in my research. As I began to acclimate, however, my research approach became much more systematic and thorough.

I discovered that there are about as many research tools and databases as there are articles within each database. Just as one requires the ability to discern and find a relevant article within a database, one requires the ability to discern and find a relevant database within a library. I did not have this, but my faculty mentor and research librarian did! I found myself coming to them occasionally in order to ask for help in clearing the fog. For my quantitative data, I ultimately

found the SimplyAnalytics application to be more than sufficient, and so I did not need to use any other application for collecting variable data. For qualitative research, I used a wide variety of library research guides. Since my study was interdisciplinary in its nature, I ended up using UW's *Political Science, Government, and Law, Economics, Sociology*, and even the *Health Sciences and Medicine* library guides.

I learned that relevant data can be found just about anywhere, but credible and rigorous data can be found just about nowhere (unless one knows where to look). That is why I found my occasional consultation with Emily Keller and Professor Thorpe to be invaluable. When seeking evidence, I would first prioritize relevant peer reviewed articles and studies that had a high number of citations. I would then look at relevant studies that matched my own study's units of analysis. Ultimately, I analyzed my information sources based on purpose and intended audience, authority and credibility, accuracy and reliability, currency and timeliness, and objectivity or bias (as I was taught to do!).