Description

A Valuable Resource

When you are awarded your Ph.D., it makes a clear statement in the academic community that you are qualified to conduct research of the highest caliber, either independently or as part of a research team.

Inherent within that statement is that you were taught how to do the research yourself – that's why you are asked to present your dissertation in an oral defense – to prove that it is your own work.

Once you move on to an institutional or corporate position, you will have access to a broader range of resources and direct reports or support personnel to help you in your research. But until then, the amount of assistance or help from academic librarian can directly impact the integrity of your work and your final degree.

Research Consultation Only

The goal of an academic librarian is to support your success. That is usually achieved with a number of administrative and educational functions during your undergraduate and graduate work – helping you learn a basic search methodology, find the right books and materials for a specific course or course assignment, and get access to materials from other off-campus sources. Once you reach the point in your studies where you're expected to deliver an independent piece of research, such as a master's thesis or doctoral dissertation, that relationship changes. It's no more that supporting help from academic librarian to turn to every time!

When you sign up for a research consultation on the library website, you gain access to the extensive skills and experience of an academic professional who, if you are smart enough to pay attention, can put you on the path to academic success. He can also save you from wasting hundreds of hours of fruitless searching in academic databases.

However, there is a critical ethical question here. Helping you prepare for your literature review in order to define your research question is a valid provision of service for a qualified librarian. Doing the research for you or, worse still, steering you towards a topic is invalid and represents a serious conflict of interest.

Respect the Code of Conduct

Challenges arise when students come to a research consultation under extreme pressure, perhaps as a result of procrastination, personal issues, or an honest inability to pick a research question or even a research topic.

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Those pressures can often lead to passivity, as the student attempts to convey total compliance and a willingness to be lead in any specific suggestion that the librarian proposes. At this point, the student is treading on very thin ice.

Such passivity puts the librarian in a very difficult position. He or she is committed and eager to help you, but if you are not willing to meet that them half way, you are getting close to a conflict of interest and a misconduct charge as the librarian may be left with no alternative than to contact your supervisor.

Preparation is Compulsory, Not Optional

By now, your last-minute plan to avoid facing your supervisor without a topic by asking a librarian to help you pick one, has clearly fallen apart, with some unpleasant consequences to follow. Even the most forlorn student can avoid this unfortunate situation.

First, don't lose track of the fact that you have made it this far in your studies. That should convince you that you have the ability, and that all you need is some guidance and support. Fortunately, that is there for the asking, but you have to step-up and request it without destroying your academic reputation in the process.

If you don't have a definitive research topic in mind, at least prepare an explanation as to why so that the librarian can get a clear sense of where your head is. In addition, prepare a basic list of topics that have interested you in the course of your studies, with some supporting explanation, so that the librarian can develop a basic profile of your interests.

Remember, your topic will still have to be approved by your supervisor before you are let loose on all those databases, and if you can't support your choice with anything else but "Dr. Smith at the library thought it would be a good fit for me," you may not get to proceed any further!

Category

1. Career Corner
2. PhDs & Postdocs

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daveishan

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