Research Experience Reflection

Academic research has always been a struggle for me when asked to write a paper. This struggle was definitely apparent when I first found that I had to write a research paper for the Social Research and Program Evaluation course at Longwood. At the beginning of the semester, my method of conducting academic research was simple because I had never had to do anything in-depth before. I just figured out what my professor wanted me to do and just found academic sources to support the topic at hand and everything else would kind of fall into place. After taking this course, my methods now have changed due to being forced to take a different route in academic research. For example, the main research topic for this course was to analyze parent involvement in Head Start children. As a class we created a survey to gather data about the parents' experience in their own involvement. At first, we only received four surveys, which was very low considering our deadline was inching closer. To gain more results, our class had to go to different Head Start locations and get parents to take the survey. Our survey submissions jumped from four to 26, which was pretty good considering the circumstances. This was something that I was not used to and never had to do before, but it was effective.

I was also asked to write a very in-depth research paper about parent involvement and how it is affected based on different aspects which were up to us. I chose to write about the effects of parent involvement in a child's education in single parent households. My method for finding academic sources was still pretty similar to what I did before, which was to find sources to support my claim, but I also wanted to find sources that battled my claim and compare them which is something that I never really have done before. I chose articles that talked about varying areas that were related to my topic and stayed away from those that were too simple and not original. I did add two new articles when revising my final paper to help add more data as well as interesting topics to make my paper more well-rounded. This was also something that I never really did before because my goal prior to this class was to find the minimum number of sources required by the teacher and to write about easy topics to research.

One of the biggest challenges that I had when completing the research assignments for this class was with developing the statistical data we received from the survey questions using a system called R. I have never been known to be tech savvy, so this was definitely a struggle. I tried my best to stay caught up during the instructions but eventually I got lost and became very frustrated. So, I took a deep breath, referred to the notes, and collaborated with my fellow peers so we all could complete the statistics together, which worked. This was a new experience for me which, looking back on it, I appreciated because I learned that there is always something you can do to overcome an obstacle.

My attitude and confidence level was lower in the middle and towards the end of the semester when most of the assignments were due. Assignment due dates started becoming closer to each other, so I had to work harder and plan more to get everything done. Now that everything is complete, I feel confident in my ability to conduct thoughtful research. What it means to “think like a researcher” is to look at statistics and conduct research with an unbiased mind or be aware that sometimes literature and statistics might not “play along” with your original plan.