

# *Crafting and Conducting Research on Student Transitions*

by Jean M. Henscheid and Jennifer R. Keup

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*Crafting and Conducting Research on Student Transitions* provides a concise and effective introduction to student transition research for practitioners, graduate students, and novice researchers. Jean M. Henscheid and Jennifer R. Keup offer an overview of the research process that includes defining the research question, selecting the appropriate methodology, data collection, analysis, and publishing results. Diverse examples of student transition research topics and related considerations are dispersed throughout the book, providing relevant context.

Henscheid served as the editor of the *Journal of The First-Year Experience & Students in Transition* from 2007-2011 and is currently an associate professor of Education Leadership and Policy at the Center for Academic Excellence at Portland State University. Keup is the director of the National Resource Center for The First-Year Experience and Students in Transition and a faculty member at the University of South Carolina, where she teaches classes on education research and the first-year experience. Perhaps the most valuable aspect of this book is the inclusion of the advice dispersed throughout each chapter by the two authors who have extensive expertise and the ability to explain complex ideas in simple language.

As the introduction accurately states, “this book is designed to be a starting point and a companion guide for other resources” (p. xiii). Administrators, students, or young faculty seeking the research basics on students in transition or first-year experience will benefit from reading this book as a primer before engaging in a research project. The concepts covered in the book apply broadly to educational research and, thus, could be helpful to anyone wanting to learn about education research on a more general level. Administrators who regularly interact with educational researchers or who want to know how research can better inform their practice will also find this book useful. As the authors state, “such knowledge allows higher education professionals to fully engage as both consumers of and contributors to the scholarly dialogue in education and on the topic of college student transition” (p. 39).

The book’s five straightforward and logically ordered chapters can be read consecutively as an overview of the entire research process or serve as a reference

guide to explore specific stages or components of student transition research. Chapter 1 aims to “help researchers distinguish between what motivates a study (the research interest and topic) and what shapes a study (the research question and problem)” (p. 1). In other words, researchers must first spend time identifying a particular focal area under the broader umbrella of student transitions and subsequently construct a research question. The authors then recommend considering the research problem, which helps identify the urgency in answering a research question and whether or not others in the same field could benefit from the study.

Next, conducting a literature review reveals what is already known and what needs to be further understood about the research question. Educational research is typically conducted to either confirm or disprove a preexisting theory (i.e., quantitative research) or develop a new theory (i.e., qualitative research). The remainder of Chapter 1 includes a brief discussion of various student transition theories and advice on conducting a literature review, including a helpful list of online education research databases. Throughout Chapter 1, the authors make a case for why the preparation stage of the research project is arguably the most important step of the process.

Assuming a research question is identified, Chapter 2 explains the process of identifying an appropriate methodology. The authors are careful not to assume readers understand terminology and offer easy-to-comprehend explanations. For example, they explain the difference between methodology and methods. Methodology is “the overarching approach or design for examining phenomenon in higher education;” whereas, a method is the specific approach or technique used to apply the methodology (p. 19). They dispel several myths about qualitative and quantitative research, emphasizing that one is not better than the other; rather, selecting an appropriate methodology is a precursor to high-quality research. The authors suggested considerations for the methodology selection fall into three categories: “functional elements,” such as the research timeline and the level of access to participants; the “purpose of the study,” as defined by the research question; and the “perspective of the researcher,” based on the philosophical vantage point, ranging from positivist to constructivist (p. 31-37).

Chapters 3 and 4 discuss the foundational elements of and process for conducting qualitative and quantitative research, respectively. As the authors state, “researchers will generally choose a qualitative approach when they wish to determine how an individual or group understands or makes meaning of a process” (p. 41). Within the context of student transitions, for instance, a qualitative study might explore “the meaning sophomores make of their actions as they move between academic majors” or to “clarify professors’ beliefs about the role first-year seminar instructional development plays in the evolution of their teaching practices” (p. 42).

Successful qualitative researchers must write well, exhibit empathy, and have strong organizational skills. At the same time, qualitative researchers must be flexible, allowing the data to determine the direction of research. When identifying a research site and a group of participants, researchers should be comfortable

developing close relationships with participants, consider practical issues such as the amount of time available to devote to a project, and be reasonably confident that the findings will have implications for a broader group. The philosophical approach to research (e.g., positivist, postpositivist, critical theorist, or constructivist) should also be considered, as it informs all aspects of qualitative research.

Qualitative researchers gather rich and often copious amounts of data through observation, focus groups, individual interviews, document analysis, and limited surveys, each of which serves a particular purpose. Participants are selected based on their potential to help explore the research question, and sample sizes are typically much smaller than quantitative studies. During the data analysis phase, a researcher is deeply immersed in the data through a process of “data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification” (p. 57).

In student transition research, a quantitative methodology is recommended when the “research goal is to test theory or to explain the outcomes of student experiences, programs, and pedagogy” that hope to “explain why and under what conditions initiatives such as first-year seminars, service-learning experiences, or peer mentoring programs are effective for new student adjustment and success” (p. 63-64). Effective quantitative researchers share the following traits: strong statistical abilities, comfort following a prescribed research path, objectivity, ability to focus on the big picture, and good technical writing skills.

Henscheid and Keup raise several important questions researchers should consider when clarifying the purpose of a quantitative study, followed by a discussion of variables. Common dependent, or outcome, variables used in student transitions research include retention, persistence, and satisfaction. Independent variables, “the conditions or characteristics that can influence, affect, and, potentially, cause outcomes,” may include demographic characteristics, such as race or gender, or curricular involvement, such as a first-year seminar (p. 68). Researchers can collect primary data, while some research questions can be addressed by analyzing secondary data sources. The book includes a list of prominent national surveys focused on student transitions that may potentially serve as secondary data sources. In order to maintain validity and reliability—the primary goals of a qualitative researcher—an appropriate data collection instrument must be designed; moreover, when selecting subjects for a study, surveying every student in a group (i.e., a population sample) may be unreasonable due to time constraints or budgetary considerations, thus various sampling techniques should be considered. The authors conclude this chapter with a brief introduction of descriptive and inferential statistical methods and suggestions for appropriate use in student transition research.

Finally, Chapter 5 emphasizes the importance of sharing research findings, describes various publication options, and offers writing strategies. A description of the various print publication options (e.g., a peer-reviewed journal, academic magazine, book, or monograph), in addition to an explanation of the various online publication and conference presentation opportunities, will help researchers decide on the most appropriate distribution outlet. For journal submission, the

authors discuss the various components of a manuscript, including the process of selecting an appropriate title and how to discuss implications for practice. Throughout this section, the authors offer a variety of insights on the review process to increase likelihood for acceptance, and given Henscheid's experience as a journal editor, readers should listen carefully. For instance, the authors warn that "writing a manuscript for publication in an academic journal is as much about what to leave out as it is what to leave in" (p. 90).

This book has several potential audiences. Orientation, retention, and transition professionals hoping to conduct student transition research, wondering how to apply current research to practice, or wanting to engage with their campus institutional research office will appreciate this concise introductory text; however, as Henscheid and Keup warn, one should be careful not to confuse "assessment and program evaluation with research" (p. 91). This book focuses on the latter, thus professionals interested in program evaluation and assessment techniques should seek a more relevant resource, many of which are available through the National Resource Center. Additionally, this book would serve as a useful introduction to the basics of higher education research for a graduate-level introductory research course or a first-year doctoral seminar course. Finally, although explored here within the context of transition programs, the concepts presented also apply more broadly to social science and higher education research.