Developing A Research Project (A Step By Step Guide)

Developing a research project is very much a creative process. Therefore, no one can precisely prescribe all the necessary activities. However, there are several general steps you can expect to take.

1. The obvious first step is to identify an area of interest. Think back over the psychology courses you've taken. What topics interested you the most? What have you read in psychology that excited you and stimulated your thinking? Asking yourself these kinds of questions will assist in identifying the area within which you would be interested in working.

2. Review your knowledge of your area. What theories are you familiar with? What specific research have you read or at least heard about? What applications of the principles and theories in this area do you know about or can you think of? This is also a good time to make an appointment with the psychology professor who teaches courses in your area of interest to discuss what you know.

3. Once you've identified what you know, it's important to identify what you don't know. For example, maybe you are familiar with the principle of "diffusion of responsibility" in social psychology. Do you know the general research procedure that establishes this principle? Much of the research on this principle has been done using adults and, especially, college students. Do you happen to know if this principle also applies to children? Are there male-female differences? Are there situations in which the principle does not apply? Research is done to fill in holes in our knowledge. You must know where the holes are before you can begin to do research.

4. Maybe the questions you raised have already been answered or at least have partial answers. To find out, you must do a literature review. The LaGrange College Library makes available Psychological Abstracts (PA) in the form of the PsychINFO database. This is accessed on line through GALILEO. Make use of it to identify published research related to your topic. If you've completed the course in research methods, you should be familiar with the information found in PA. If not, the Psychology Department owns a videotape describing this, which we can arrange for you to view. You will also find your textbooks very useful. Every psychology textbook has a reference list, which contains the complete citation of every publication referred to in the text. Often this is the most important research that has been done in an area.

5. Of course, it's not enough just to identify relevant research. You've got to read it. The LaGrange College Library has a pretty good collection of recently published journals. However, if the Library doesn't have something you need to read, Dr.
Robinson can arrange for an inter library loan. He does a superior job with this so don't hesitate to ask him.

6. As you read, you will find that many of your questions already have answers. However, read critically. Make use of what you know about limitations of various research designs. Maybe the research can be done better. Maybe it can be done with different subjects or with variations on the methodology so as to extend the generality of the results. Maybe you can think of new questions as you become more familiar with research in an area. Your reading of research should lead you to add to your list of questions and make you familiar with the general research procedures used in an area. As you find research, read it, and raise new questions, you should get together frequently with the psychology professor you have selected to assist you. Your professor can guide you in the process of deciding what may be worth reading and what isn't and will certainly be helpful as a sounding board as you think about your topic.

The goal of this entire process is to identify a question that is interesting to you and answerable given the resources of the College. Your psychology professor will assist you but the majority of the work is up to you. We don't do it for you, nor will we hand you a project ready made. This is an opportunity for you to learn how to "do psychology" and the only way to learn that is to do psychology. Remember, the process is not hard but it will be time consuming. However, if you are really interested in psychology, it is a process you will enjoy.