
2006

Guest Editorial a Reader-Centered Approach: Making Sense of Research Articles

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Recommended Citation

Wilson, Andrew (2006) "Guest Editorial a Reader-Centered Approach: Making Sense of Research Articles," *Oracle: The Research Journal of the Association of Fraternity/Sorority Advisors*: Vol. 2 : Iss. 1 , Article 2.
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.25774/472d-e825>
Available at: <https://scholarworks.wm.edu/oracle/vol2/iss1/2>

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GENERAL INFORMATION

Oracle: The Research Journal of the Association of Fraternity Advisors advances the study of college fraternities and sororities through a peer reviewed academic journal promoting scholarly discourse among partners invested in the college fraternal movement. The vision of *Oracle: The Research Journal of the Association of Fraternity Advisors* is to serve as the premier forum for academic discourse and scholarly inquiry regarding the college fraternity and sorority movement.

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Subscriptions:

Subscriptions may be purchased by contacting the Central Office. Single issues are available for \$20; a one-year subscription is \$35; a two-year subscription is \$50.

Submissions:

Oracle: The Research Journal of the Association of Fraternity Advisors accepts submissions focused on articulating research involving fraternity and sorority members at the collegiate, alumni, inter/national organization, and volunteer advisory levels. Manuscripts should be written for the student affairs generalist who has broad responsibility for educational leadership, policy, staff development, and management. Articles on specialized topics should provide the generalist with an understanding of the importance of the program to student affairs overall and fraternity/sorority advising specifically.

Research articles for *Oracle: The Research Journal of the Association of Fraternity Advisors* should stress the underlying issues or problems that stimulated the research; treat the methodology concisely; and, most importantly, offer a full discussion of results, implications, and conclusions. In the belief that AFA readers have much to learn from one another, we also encourage the submission of thoughtful, documented essays or historical perspectives.

Visit <http://www.fraternityadvisors.org/resources/oracle/oracle.htm> for more detailed submission guidelines.

GUEST EDITORIAL
A READER-CENTERED APPROACH:
MAKING SENSE OF RESEARCH ARTICLES

Andrew Wilson

Just as educational researchers often struggle making their findings accessible to a wide audience, student affairs practitioners frequently find difficulty with research articles in terms of clarity and understanding. Recent scholarly articles suggest student affairs practitioners rethink our work (Love & Estanek, 2004; National Association of Student Personnel Administrators & ACPA, 2004). In addition, there is external pressure to produce learning outcomes by applying newly generated knowledge in the practical realm. Given the reader-centered approach of *Oracle: The Research Journal of the Association of Fraternity Advisors*, this guest editorial shares advice on navigating research journal articles. These tips will aid in the understanding and practical application of research in student affairs.

Why are you reading the article?

Identifying your rationale for reading an article guides your understanding. For instance, readers hoping an article provides advice on a particular campus problem will differ in their reading approach from those seeking to remain current on new research. Practitioners wanting to learn more about a specific campus issue would benefit from a review of the literature and recommendations on the topic from a wide range of journals. Meanwhile, readers seeking broad information for ongoing professional development are likely to benefit from the variety of articles published in journals such as *Oracle: The Research Journal of the Association of Fraternity Advisors*. Knowing the purpose for reading frames how you approach the article.

What are you reading?

Researchers utilize various research methods and study highly specific topics. Regardless of the rationale for reading an article, reading the literature review can certainly help in building knowledge of a particular topic. In addition, articles typically include introductions that explain the importance of the research and help frame the significance of the new findings. If a reader's goal is simply to understand the article then he or she should pay closer attention to discussion sections rather than methods sections. However, when evaluating an article, readers should spend ample time focusing upon methods and findings as well as the other sections.

How should a reader decide if this is a high-quality journal article?

While we hope journal editors would only publish articles that use rigorous methods and with interesting findings, there are a myriad of reasons why questionable scholarship sometimes appears in print. Readers seeking to inform practice using research articles must acquire a critical reading eye. To hone evaluative skills related to research, readers should rely on researchers who typically know more about a topic than they do. For example, readers who want to replicate a study or better understand how a researcher analyzed data should utilize a graduate student, a colleague, and/or a faculty member with knowledge of educational research design. Authors provide contact information to serve as resources and typically welcome dialogue on their materials. Even practitioners who have completed courses in advanced research design and statistics can find

approaching researchers very helpful because they typically remain more current than busy practitioners.

In addition to understanding design and analysis, readers should pay close attention to study limitations. Authors outline limitations to indicate how studies may have limited use given different institutional context. For instance, if data collection occurred at a large, public institution, a practitioner at a small, private campus may want to consider institutional type before implementing the same study. Since every study has limitations, readers must determine the extent to which such limitations may affect the stated findings or maybe even discredit the research. Depending upon a reader's purpose for examining a study, some limitations may be more tolerable than others. A reader should call upon the expertise of resources such as graduate students and faculty members to assist in assessing limitations, if necessary.

How do you apply what you are reading?

While readers should never rely upon any single section of an article, discussion sections remain filled with useful applications for practitioners and scholars. Discussion sections typically include recommendations for practice and suggestions for future research. This may be the most important part of the article for busy practitioners. In addition, context is important to consider. For example, in EFFECTS OF FRATERNITY/SORORITY MEMBERSHIP AND RECRUITMENT SEMESTER ON GPA AND RETENTION, Nelson et al., provide data to assist the reader in understanding the impact of deferred recruitment. The data, collected in the early 1990s, still has pertinence today since the issue of deferred recruitment remains a debated topic in the fraternal world. This article provides history to assist campus practitioners conducting their own research on the role of deferred recruitment. Reading research articles conducted on specific topics over a long period can allow us to evaluate how the context has changed and the issue has evolved.

Application of recommendations to Oracle: The Research Journal of the Association of Fraternity Advisors

We hope you will apply these strategies as you read this issue of *Oracle: The Research Journal of the Association of Fraternity Advisors*. In this issue, Dr. William Molasso examines fake identification use among college students with a particular focus on fraternity and sorority members; Jack Trump and Dr. James Wallace present a qualitative study on gay males in fraternities that includes rich quotations from participants describing their experiences; to add to our knowledge of alcohol intervention strategies, Dr. Andrew Wall evaluates the impact on fraternity and sorority members of a widely-used online alcohol education tool; Chad Ellsworth investigates if the activities students define as hazing differed among fraternities, sororities, Reserve Officer Training Corps, NCAA athletic teams, and marching bands; finally, Suzy Nelson, Silas Halperin, Timothy Wasserman, and Peter Graham assess the relationship between fraternity/sorority membership and semester of recruitment on academic achievement.

Each article presents an overview, an in-depth literature review, and offers discussions that include recommendations for future practice and research and implications for practitioners. A variety of research methods and analyses are utilized in these studies.

We hope you continue to use *Oracle: The Research Journal of the Association of Fraternity Advisors* to grow professionally and propel forward the fraternity movement.

Oracle: The Research Journal of the Association of Fraternity Advisors
Vol. 2, Iss. 1, February 2006

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