

# A Rationale for Using Qualitative Research in Student Affairs

Kathleen Manning

Higher Education and Student Affairs Program,  
University of Vermont

*This article outlines the use of qualitative research in student affairs. A rationale for the appropriateness of these methods as a means of knowledge generation is suggested.*

Student affairs educators possess a legacy as experts on students (Brown, 1972). This role requires that a segment of student affairs management and operation is the collection of student opinion (Astin, 1986), assessment of program effectiveness (Hansen, 1978; Kuh, 1979), and measurement of campus life quality. In the past, the majority of this measurement and assessment relied on quantitative research methods (e.g., experimentation, causal comparison, correlational studies) using statistical analysis, constructing generalizations across populations, and creating student typologies and normative patterns. The worldview or perspective underlying quantitative research and its approach to knowledge generation is the conventional paradigm. This paradigm assumes a mechanistic worldview, uniformity of time and space, analogous goals for the social and natural sciences, and the scientific method as a means for knowledge discovery (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

With the advent of Einsteinian and quantum physics the conventional paradigm strained to retain its purported explanatory and theoretical power in the sciences (Capra, 1984) as well as in the social sciences (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Lucas, 1985). Under the strain research com-

munities within the natural and social sciences experienced a profound paradigm shift or change in the assumptions used to research and generate knowledge (Kuhn, 1970). This shift found its way to student affairs (Kuh, Whitt, & Shedd, 1987; Lucas, 1985), with momentous changes in the ways that theory, practice, and research methods are viewed. The paradigm resulting from this shift is called *emergent*. The emergent paradigm encompasses the following axiomatic assumptions: "realities are multiple, constructed, and holistic;" the "knower and known are interactive, inseparable;" "only time- and context-bound working hypotheses (idiographic statements) are possible;" "all entities are in a state of mutual simultaneous shaping;" and "inquiry is value-bound" (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 37). Research methods based on the emergent paradigm are predominantly qualitative (e.g., ethnographic, case study, naturalistic inquiry) using the techniques of interviewing, observation, and document analysis for data collection.

The student affairs field, its scholars and practitioners have long heard cries to use both qualitative and quantitative means to research issues concerning students. This article discusses the rationale for using qualitative research in the emergent paradigm tradition in student affairs practice.

## WHY QUALITATIVE RESEARCH IN STUDENT AFFAIRS?

The purpose of emergent paradigm qualitative research is *Verstehen* or understanding (Bogdan & Biklen, 1982; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Qualitative research methods have been used to explore campus rituals and ceremonies (Man-

---

Kathleen Manning is an assistant professor and can be contacted at the Higher Education and Student Affairs Program, University of Vermont, Waterman 228, Burlington, VT 05405.

ning, 1989), campus culture (Kuh, Schuh, Whitt, & Associates, 1991), leadership styles of university presidents (Tierney, 1988), and faculty culture (Clark, 1985, 1989). The object of qualitative research is to understand the meaning that respondents interviewed and observed (e.g., students, staff members, faculty, college presidents) made of their experiences. Discovering meaning as well as the manner in which people understand themselves and their world is the *raison d'être* of emergent paradigm qualitative research.

Qualitative research methods that seek to build understanding and discover meaning are immensely practical for student affairs educators. For example, quality-of-life surveys are usually multiple-choice questionnaires with limited room for comments. Qualitative research methods with a face-to-face, open-ended interviewing and dialogue approach to data collection provide students the opportunity to give an unqualified assessment of campus life. Rather than an a priori set of categories within which students fit their views, respondents are free to choose aspects of student life upon which to comment. Through qualitative research, information completely unanticipated by those soliciting input about the quality of campus life can be collected. The resulting data are richly descriptive and faithful to students' perspectives.

Qualitative research methods provide the tools for beginning to understand the complexity of campus life and student affairs. Metaphor as a way to describe meaning, thick description in the final case study, and interviewing that delves deeply into a respondent's perspective are techniques that assist student affairs educators to better understand students' points of view. Qualitative research methods do not seek to describe a norm but to understand meaning and gain knowledge about those who vary from that norm as well as add to the richness and complexity of campus life.

Multiculturalism is an important area of student affairs about which staff can gain knowledge through qualitative research. A great deal can be learned from a case study of an African American student's experiences with orientation, the residence hall system, or classroom environment. This method of understanding another's perspective can build fundamental knowledge about campus multiculturalism. The knowledge gained can assist student affairs

educators to perceive multiple cultural perspectives, similarities, and differences. Through qualitative research student affairs educators can explore questions such as, what institutional barriers thwart the achievement of students of color, women, and other nonmajority students? What does it feel like to be a student of color in a predominantly White institution? What are the cultural values conveyed through campus rituals and ceremonies? These findings, not meant to be generalized to the larger population, are a valuable source of information for campus program planning, policy, and decision making. Furthermore, the research serves a second purpose of building relationships with the respondents while valuable data are collected.

Trust and rapport are important aspects of data collection. Any sharing between respondent and researcher who, by nature of the research process, learn from one another builds a bond of understanding, caring, and connection. The researcher struggles to understand the respondent's perspective and way of looking at the world. The respondent struggles to put his or her feelings and meanings into words for, perhaps, the first time. Both researcher and respondent grow as they teach and learn from one another. Building trust and rapport is a well-recognized process to student affairs educators.

Qualitative research methods depend heavily on interviewing techniques that disclose respondents' feelings, meanings, and understandings. This process from beginning to end is very similar to the empathetic listening skills student affairs educators incorporate into their administrative styles. As college administrators who listen well, sift through diverse student views, and struggle to make sense of multiple explanations of disciplinary incidents, student affairs educators are well equipped with the rudimentary skills of qualitative research interviewing.

The knowledge gained from qualitative research can equip student affairs educators as they struggle to fulfill their long-standing goal of student advocacy (Appleton, Briggs, & Rhatigan, 1978). Whether viewed from a position of direct and vocal support or one of representing student views, communicating student needs to various campus constituencies is a major role for student affairs educators. Knowledge about students that is grounded in sound research practice strengthens the credibility of this communication.

## ISSUES OF CONCERN

The use of qualitative methods is the subject of a profound debate within the research community (Gage, 1989; Rist, 1977; Smith, 1983, 1986). The issues of this debate, although becoming more focused through dialogue, are still argued at conventions, meetings, and within journal articles. The central points of this debate include concern about the validity of qualitative research, labor-intensive nature of the method, generation of context- and time-specific interpretations rather than generalizations across populations, dissemination difficulties, and need for training. Each issue is explored in relation to the concerns it raises for student affairs.

### *1. The validity of qualitative research.*

This issue arises from the fact that qualitative research does not rely on tests for reliability and credibility that are external to data collection and analysis. Instead, the intensely personal respondent-researcher relationship is central to any measure of faithfulness of data to the respondents' experience (Lincoln & Guba, 1986). As such, techniques ensuring a quality study are internal to the research process. The judicious use of these procedures depends solely on the researcher's sound and professional methodological practice.

The issue of validity rests on the researcher's competent use of the procedures of authenticity and trustworthiness (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, 1986). These procedures incorporate techniques including member checking, participant observation, persistent engagement, and respondent consent forms to ensure that the interpretations and working hypotheses of the study are faithful to the respondents' perspectives:

Trustworthiness and authenticity focus on the researcher's ethical practice as well as ensure high-quality research through an emphasis on a trusting and respectful researcher-respondent relationship, co-construction of research findings, and involvement in the research site such that differing perspectives are discovered and acknowledged. In all cases, the researcher should be able to demonstrate that he or she has used techniques that ensure the trustworthiness and authenticity of the research. If not, the findings are, justifiably, called into question.

### *2. The labor-intensive nature of qualitative research.*

Qualitative research can be *extremely* time consuming. Data collection is a labor-intensive process because the researcher immerses himself or herself into the culture being studied. Time is invested to build an understanding of a community, through contact with the members, exposure to their norms, and familiarity with their practices.

In student affairs practice the time-consuming nature of qualitative research can be weighed against the time and effort wasted on programs and services that fail to meet their intended purpose, go unattended by students, or needlessly waste valuable resources. When student affairs educators do not collect information through sound research methods, but rather build programs and services on educated guesses and anecdotal impressions, the time spent on misguided programs can exceed that invested in qualitative research.

### *3. The generation of context- and time-specific interpretations rather than generalizations across populations.*

With understanding as the *raison d'être* of emergent paradigm qualitative research, the traditional results of conventional paradigm research (i.e., law-like statements that seek to predict and control) are absent. Emergent paradigm researchers do not seek to aggregate ideas and beliefs but instead delve deeply into a topic and perspective. The case study or end product of the research focuses on depth rather than breadth.

The inability to generalize emergent paradigm research has led to debate and consternation (Donmoyer, 1990; Smith, 1983, 1986). What do you do with results that cannot predict and control the educational environment? What is the purpose of studying a topic if it lacks specific application to other educational situations that differ vastly from the original research site?

The answers to the preceding questions originate with an understanding of the purpose of emergent paradigm qualitative research. Such research does not attempt to predict and control an environment such as higher education, which is complex and dynamic (Weick, 1985). Knowledge generated at one college cannot be simply applied to another college. Instead, the understanding and meaning discovered through the research builds a more informed and knowledgeable perspective on the part of the re-

searcher and readers of the case (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

#### 4. *The dissemination difficulties of qualitative research.*

The conclusions and interpretations of qualitative research are primarily communicated in the form of case studies. The case study is written after an extensive process of data collection through interviewing and participant observation (Bogdan & Biklen, 1982). Thick description that vividly paints a picture of the research context as well as a literary style that lends itself to interpretive understandings and meanings are the primary vehicles for communicating research results. The resulting case study is richly descriptive, interesting to read, and lengthy. Unfortunately, this length precludes case studies from inclusion in journals that have editorial guidelines built on less descriptive quantitative research reports. In the "publish or perish" environment occupied by education faculty, the limited outlets for publication discourage many from venturing into qualitative research.

#### 5. *The need for training in qualitative research methods.*

A final but central concern to researchers who use qualitative research methods is the proliferation of their use without proper training. Just as it is inconceivable that one would use quantitative methods (e.g., experimentation, survey, design, statistics) without training, ethical and methodologically sound use of qualitative research methods requires formal training.

The issue of using qualitative research methods without training stems from the fact that qualitative data collection techniques are skills in the repertoire of practitioners and researchers. These techniques can be used with little training. But without extensive conversation during a credited course or training session, the less obvious, although fundamental, concepts of qualitative research methods remain unarticulated and misunderstood. These concepts include ethics, preexisting or guiding theory, voice, time, and place in the case study, and interpretation.

If student affairs educators are to use qualitative research methods as a way to generate knowledge, specific training must be undertaken. The following goals are offered as objectives for teaching and learning qualitative

methods through credited courses, particularly in student affairs preparation programs.

1. Explore the nature of the paradigm shift as related to using qualitative research methods.
2. Investigate the implications of the emergent paradigm toward understanding student affairs organizations and higher education institutions.
3. Practice data collection and analysis, case study reporting, and other techniques of qualitative research.
4. Write a case study that indicates that the student has learned the techniques of qualitative research methods.
5. Understand the strengths and weaknesses of qualitative research methods.
6. Determine whether particular research questions "fit" the use of qualitative research methods.

The focus of many qualitative research courses is an experiential one in which students learn the method by actually performing the techniques. Qualitative research is undertaken in an effort to raise ethical concerns, experience the techniques, and work through the interpretive process of data analysis. The reference section of this article contains resources that can serve as a starting point for people wishing to learn qualitative research methods.

## SUMMARY

Qualitative research methods have much to offer the student affairs field. They can help make sense of complex questions, address the meaning present in a situation, and delve deeply into understanding another's perspective. As such, qualitative research methodology reflects and parallels the complexity and richness of the student affairs field itself. This article has identified both the hopes and issues of concern in the use of these methods in student affairs.

## REFERENCES

- Appleton, J., Briggs, C., & Rhatigan, J. (1978). *Pieces of eight: The rites, roles, and style of the dean by eight who have been there*. Portland, OR: National Association of Student Personnel Administrators.
- Astin, A. (1986). *New report tracks 20 years shift in fresh-*

- men attitudes, values, and life goals. Los Angeles, CA: Cooperative Institutional Research Program.
- Bogdan, R., & Biklen, S. (1982). *Qualitative research for education: An introduction to theory and methods*. Boston: Allyn & Bacon.
- Brown, R. (1972). *Student development: A return to the academy*. Alexandria, VA: American College Personnel Association.
- Capra, F. (1984). *The tao of physics*. Berkeley, CA: Shambhala.
- Bark, B. (1985). Faculty culture. In M. Finkelstein (Ed.), *ASHE reader on faculty and faculty issues in colleges and universities* (pp. 129-142). Washington, DC: Association for the Study of Higher Education.
- Clark, B. (1989). The academic life: Small worlds, different worlds. *Educational Researcher*, 18, 4-8.
- Donmoyer, R. (1990). Generalizability and the single case study. In E. Eisner & A. Peshkin (Eds.), *Qualitative inquiry in education: The continuing debate* (pp. 175-200). New York: Teachers College Press.
- Gage, N. (1989). The paradigm wars and their aftermath: A "historical" sketch of research on teaching since 1989. *Educational Researcher*, 18, 4-10.
- Hansen, G. (Ed.). (1978). *Evaluating program effectiveness*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Kuh, G. (1979). *Evaluation in student affairs*. Alexandria, VA: American College Personnel Association.
- Kuh, G., Schuh, J., Whitt, E., & Associates. (1991). *Involving colleges*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Kuh, G., Whitt, E., & Shedd, J. (1987). *Student affairs work 2001: A paradigmatic odyssey*. Alexandria, VA: American College Personnel Association.
- Kuhn, T. (1970). *The structure of scientific revolutions*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Lincoln, Y., & Guba, E. (1985). *Naturalistic inquiry*. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.
- Lincoln, Y., & Guba, E. (1986). But is it rigorous? Trustworthiness and authenticity in naturalistic evaluation. In D. Williams (Ed.), *Naturalistic evaluation* (pp. 73-84). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Lucas, C. (1985). Out at the edge: Notes on a paradigm shift. *Journal of Counseling and Development*, 64, 165-172.
- Manning, K. (1989). *Campus rituals and cultural meaning*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Indiana University, Bloomington.
- Rist, R. (1977). On the relations among educational research paradigms: From disdain to detente. *Anthropology and Education Quarterly*, 8, 42-49.
- Smith, J. (1983). Quantitative versus qualitative research: An attempt to clarify the issue. *Educational Researcher*, 12, 6-13.
- Smith, J. (1986). Closing down the conversation: The end of the quantitative-qualitative debate among educational inquirers. *Educational Researcher*, 15, 4-12.
- Tierney, W. (1988). Organizational culture in higher education: Defining the essentials. *Journal of Higher Education*, 59, 2-21.
- Weick, K. (1985). Sources of order in underorganized systems: Themes in recent organizational theory. In Y. Lincoln (Ed.), *Organizational theory and inquiry: The paradigm revolution* (pp. 106-136). Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.