

Amanda Greene
Summer Internship Review: QRSI
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Summary and Evaluation

The summer internship and professional development grant enabled me to participate in the Qualitative Research Summer Intensive (QRSI) training program at the University of North Carolina's Odum Institute. While the program was only a week long, I came away with practical skills in addition to new ideas about how to orient myself towards the non-academic job market.

The first two days were dedicated to a course called "Crafting Phenomenological Research," which covered both the philosophy and the pragmatics of doing phenomenological social science research. Given how the philosophical tradition of phenomenology informs my doctoral research it was fascinating to see this theory translated into more applied practice. I realized that I already had the knowledge and many of the skills to perform this sort of research, but that acquiring a new vocabulary to label those skills and expertise could help me translate them to very different audiences and contexts than the ones I currently target. The third day was a course on "Analyzing Online Conversations" that surveyed practical issues about data collection and research design. It was especially useful to be introduced to software that could aid in collecting and sorting through the massive amount of data on social media sites, and also to have serious conversations about how qualitative research and discourse analysis could work in tandem with big data. The last two days were dedicated to "Coding and Analyzing Qualitative Data." Coding is a means of annotating data in order to effectively arrange it into larger theories and categories. Similarly to the phenomenology course, I noticed that skills I already have (such as close reading) could be easily applied to this work. Again, though, I learned a very different vocabulary for representing those skills as well as some new ways of making annotations to deliberately target qualitative research questions.

In addition to the courses, coffee and lunch breaks gave me ample time to talk with other participants who came from a wide range of backgrounds. While many were academics in social science departments, a large percentage were using these qualitative skills to do policy or market research in non-university environments. Our informal conversations introduced me to new organizations that I potentially would be interested in working for. They also made me feel confident about my ability to market myself to companies that regularly hire qualitative social science researchers but that may not be as familiar with the humanities. Just to give one example, ReD Associates is a consulting company that explicitly stresses their qualitative, phenomenological approach. Drawing on the vocabulary and skills that I learned over the week-long intensive as well as my own supplementary research, I firmly believe that I could leverage my humanities background to be competitive for one of their jobs or paid internships.

Suggestions

I want to underscore how useful this program was in order to suggest that the department should emphasize the “professional training” aspect of the grant, not just the internships. I believe this will make the opportunity more accessible and personalizable for individual participants who want to explore non-tenure track options but do not see an immediate or intuitive fit in another sector. I initially struggled to be open to career alternatives because many of the ready-made trajectories (especially in publishing, library science, or museums) did not appeal to me. Once I began thinking about the skills and the discourses that could help translate the things I love about doing research within the university to wider audiences in the private and public sphere, this exploration became both more manageable and empowering. I now see multiple options for paid internships that I will likely apply for in the future, but this qualitative training was a necessary first step to gain the exposure, knowledge, and confidence to pursue these opportunities.

I appreciate the department supporting me in this exploration. I am very happy to talk more about my experience or do anything else I can to support this grant program and other discussions of non academic career pathways.