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Dissertation Construction: Building Better Scholars with Our Toolbox Series

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Short Abstract

Librarians play a pivotal role in sharpening doctoral students' information literacy toolset, and our Dissertation Toolbox targets specific skill gaps through a comprehensive approach. This presentation shares our project journey, offering insights into a model that successfully empowers doctoral students to participate in contemporary scholarship by conducting precise, impactful research.

Extended Abstract

In a post-truth, Google-centric, and AI-integrated world, doctoral students need more help than ever with their research. Librarians can help these students hone their information literacy skills so that they can conduct precise, intentional research that cuts through information noise while also including emerging technologies (Paul et al., 2024).

At our institution, we offer a suite of services and modalities (McKeown et al., 2024) to support our doctoral students, ranging from asynchronous videos to live 1-1 research consultations. However, the crown jewel of our doctoral support is our Dissertation Toolbox. The Dissertation Toolbox is a series of twelve live webinars offered throughout the year, designed to be attended in any order.

The topics were intentionally selected to address a specific common gap in doctoral students' information literacy skills, and each session fills that gap. The topics are as follows:

- **Finding and Staying Current on a Research Topic** - Information is being created and dispersed more rapidly than ever before. Doctoral students must be able to find the most recent information in their fields in order to choose a research topic, and they must stay up to date with the latest developments that may be published over the months (or years) of their dissertation work. (Pontis et al., 2017)

- **Reading a Scholarly Article and Finding Definitions** - In this session, doctoral students learn how to read and understand scholarly articles, as well as to reflect on how the found articles fit into broader scholarly conversation. They will also learn how to use scholarly articles and other academic sources to find precise, subject-specific definitions of key terms. (Keshav, 2007)
- **Literature Gap and Future Research** - Doctoral students can be intimidated by finding a literature gap, an under-explored area in the research literature that forms the basis of their dissertation research question. In this session, they learn to engage with existing literature to find gaps (and calls for future research) identified by scholars in the field, as well as reflect on how they can find their own specific research edge to help fill gaps. (Farooq, 2017)
- **Organizing Research** - Doctoral students are introduced to a variety of tools and techniques to organize, store, and synthesize their research seamlessly. By the end of the session, they are empowered to choose the process(es) and tools best for their needs. (Paul et al., 2024)
- **Citing Articles and Similar Resources** - The scholarly conversation can be intimidating to new scholars looking to wade into the dialogue. Librarians help students begin untangling the scholarly web by using a single article to locate more resources. Citation-chaining backwards can unearth seminal research, while going forward can illuminate cutting-edge research and developments in the field. Related results can present new approaches and perspectives on the student's research question. (Hirt et al., 2023)
- **Evaluating and Using Information** - In an age of predatory journals and hallucinated AI citations, how is a doctoral student to know whether information is reliable? Through this session, they learn how to critically evaluate information sources based on their format and context, as well as reflect on their own ethical and legal reuse of content when writing a dissertation. (Dadaczynski et al., 2021)
- **Finding Grey Literature** - No truly exhaustive literature review is complete without considering grey literature (conference proceedings, white papers, reports, etc). Doctoral students will learn what and where to find these materials, which may contain more depth, a broader perspective, and more recent information than scholarly articles and books published by traditional publishers. (Kamei et al., 2021)
- **Finding Seminal Research** - When exploring the depth and breadth of a topic's scholarly conversation, it is crucial to determine the foundation of that dialogue. Seminal (key, pivotal, landmark) research is works that begin a new conversation in research, but that impact may not always be apparent at the time. Students learn to identify seminal works by the contextual clues left by time, as well as through identification by other scholars. (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2018)
- **Researching Theoretical and Conceptual Frameworks** - Frameworks provide a lens for the study, establish parameters to keep the study focused, and provide an argument defending the research topic's value. Despite their critical role in the dissertation, it can be overwhelming to consider all possible theories, concepts, and models that can serve as a framework. This webinar focuses on practical strategies for identifying possible frameworks, as well as times for internalizing and applying different roles of conceptual and theoretical frameworks. (Kumar et al., 2022)
- **Finding Information on Research Methodology & Design** - The core of a dissertation is the empirical research conducted, which must be based in careful deliberation of the research goals and the most appropriate available research methodologies (qualitative or quantitative), designs (case study, correlational, etc), and methods (survey, focus group, etc). Doctoral students will learn how to find sufficient information to defend their research choices. (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2018)
- **Locating Tests and Measurements** - Finding (or not) the right established, validated research test/tool/instrument can change the trajectory of a dissertation research plan. This webinar empowers doctoral students to search far for a variety of options, determine the best fit, and establish permissions for the reuse of the test. (Karadag, 2011)
- **Exhausting the Literature** - Doctoral students must be confident that their dissertations comprehensively address the theories, concepts, methods, and research related to their research. Librarians demonstrate advanced search techniques and practical tricks for revealing all of the relevant literature, so that students can confidently say, "I'm done." (Randolph, 2009)

The Dissertation Toolbox has been a resounding success at our university. Over the past two years (May 2023- May 2025), we have had over 675 attendees to our live sessions and many more asynchronous views of our recordings. This presentation will outline the development of

our successful Toolbox series and share our latest improvements, such as quadrupling the session frequency, cross-training librarians to increase the number of instructors, adding additional days and times, creating more asynchronous Dissertation Toolbox content, and integrating AI literacy.

> **Session goals.** Attendees will be able to...

- List information literacy challenges faced by doctoral students
- Articulate how librarians can fill research knowledge gaps
- Advocate for multimodal, in-depth library integration into the dissertation research process

> **Brief session outline**

- Context and description of the library Dissertation Toolbox
- History and development
- Expansion and continuous improvement

> **Participant interaction.** We will use live polling software to...

- Collect and display audience feedback on the most common research challenges faced by their doctoral students
- Evaluate openness to librarian collaboration before and after the session
- Body Polling (hands up or down, etc.) for concepts throughout

> **References**

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Presenting Speakers

Tammy Ivins

Reference, Instruction, and Institutional Repository Librarian at National University

Tammy Ivins (she/her or they/them) is a Reference & Instruction Librarian who has been at NU since 2022. Her research interests include educational technology, user experience, and librarianship as a career. Prior to NU, she worked for over 12 years at various academic libraries. A first-generation college student, Tammy has a master's degree in Library Science (2011) and Conflict Management & Resolution (2020). A Hufflepuff, she lives in North Carolina with her spouse and a menagerie of pets. Tammy enjoys good stories in all forms, whether books, movies, and more.

Stephanie Johnson

Reference and Instruction Librarian at National University

Reference librarian to the School of Business & Economics, as well as the liaison to Military-Affiliated & Veteran Students

Benita Ghura

User Experience Librarian at National University

Benita Ghura is the User Experience Librarian at National University and the liaison for Sanford College of Education and the paralegal program. Before getting her Masters Degree in Library Science, Benita got her J.D. degree at Catholic University, Columbus School of Law, and worked at a public law library for 8 years. In her spare time, Benita is an avid ballroom dancer and enjoys attending competitions in Southern California.

Amanda Bezet

Graduate Student Success Librarian at National University

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PM - 2:00 PM