

ANALYSIS OF AAD GRADUATE RESEARCH

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My current research interests intersect with ideas of experimental contemporary art and artists, site-specific installations, artist residencies, and nontraditional outreach and engagement, all specifically tied to rural arts and culture. I believe that there is a place where several of these ideas crossover, possibly tied to the concept of the contemporary rural artist residency, where artists come together to create experimental artwork while engaging with a community and an artist collective in a rural area, therefore stimulating arts and culture and developing artwork that builds upon theoretical concepts identified with the rural. My research inquiries could take me in many directions as I begin to further explore this topic, but the idea of contributing to a body of knowledge that is fairly new and limited is very exciting to me, especially because rural culture is intimately tied to my identity and self-construct. Much of the area where I was raised and where generations of my family were raised has been experiencing dramatic economic and social changes in recent decades and populations in these communities are plummeting. Therefore I am also very interested in research regarding community cultural development, specifically in how arts and culture can play a role in the economic development of rural communities and small towns. As Savannah Barrett so strongly emphasized in her own research, there are many possibilities for cultural organizations to help develop rural communities, the engines of America, but the support mechanisms to drive these projects are not yet established. I analyzed the Masters research of two fairly recent graduate students of the Arts and Arts Administration Program, one being a research project and the other a capstone, that were both very relevant to my own interests. I was able to identify their research question, conceptual framework, data collection techniques and interpretation and was able to make conjectures about how their work might build on existing knowledge.

I first analyzed Savannah Barrett's research project on community arts programs of the Cooperative Extension Service, focusing specifically on extension programming initiatives in Kentucky and Wisconsin (Barrett, 2013). She questioned, "What is the history of the Fine Arts Extension program in Kentucky as compared to the history of the 'Putting the Culture back in Agriculture' project in Wisconsin?" Her sub-questions focused on how the Fine Arts Extension program impacts rural Kentucky communities and the ways in which these specific programs might serve as model rural arts projects for other states. In general, she researched to explore the broad history of the extension service arts programs and then supplement that knowledge with a comparative evaluation of the Kentucky and Wisconsin examples as model arts and culture

programming in rural communities. Barrett provided a rich examination of arts and culture data from both rural and urban spheres in order to establish a detailed context for her study. She discussed at length the difficulties that rural communities and rural economies face today and the role that arts and culture organizations can play in their revitalization, which leads to questions of how extension programs can support development as well. Much of her research supported the importance and necessity of the Cooperative Extension Service as an alternative to often unreliable support and policy at the national level. Her research assessed cultural policy impacting rural cultural programming and current needs for funding and policy models as well as anticipated direction. In order to demonstrate the importance of the extension services as well as build on the idea of the model extension program she supplemented literature review with field research and case studies on the two state programs in Kentucky and Wisconsin.

Barrett utilized three qualitative data collection techniques which included comparative case studies, field data-collection, and extensive literature review. Both the data collection and literature reviews greatly informed the case studies, in which she examined the design, challenges and best practices of two extension programs that were both formed in 2005. She obtained data on the Wisconsin project that was publicly available, since the project had already been completed and evaluated, and supplemented this data with interviews of project leadership. Research of the Kentucky program required her to conduct interviews, surveys and personal communication with supervisors, staff and constituents in order to gather comparative information. The interviews and personal communication provided insight into the program specifics as well as best practices, methods and challenges and the surveys gathered data about the program's stakeholders and participants' assessment of the programs, therefore she gathered both an internal and external perspective. Barrett also conducted extensive literature review to understand and situate her case study in the greater world of rural community arts knowledge, grounding her in the field and providing context to her research. She spent two years gathering resources related to historical and contemporary arts programs in the Cooperation Extension Service and also spent time reviewing documents from both of the case study programs.

Once she had gathered her data, Barrett organized it within a spreadsheet for comparison and coded the data across multiple interviews so that it would be consistent and transferable. Themes included mission, purpose, assets, challenges, organizational structure, capital and

human resources, goals, value and results. She evaluated effectiveness and the potential for repeatability with other extension programs, an important end goal for her research. To validate her research findings, she employed a variety of strategies suggested by John Creswell in his text *Research Design* in order to ensure her data was as accurate and objective as possible. These included comparing her interview transcripts to recordings, developing a coding strategy in advance of data collection and using the same coding procedures throughout her process, inviting respondents to confirm the accuracy of their interview statements and utilizing peer and advisor reviews.

Overall, Savannah Barrett's research project was very thorough, and while it was extremely informative, demonstrating her extensive literature review, the case study analysis and field research provided a unique perspective that allowed her to contribute in her own way to an ever-growing body of knowledge on rural arts and culture and the Cooperative Extension Service.

The second paper that I analyzed was the capstone project of Leigh Detra Mallonee who focused her research on the role of local arts organizations in revitalization, civic engagement and community-building (Mallonee, 2010). This capstone provided a quite different approach from Barrett's research project even though one could say that the two share a similar area of interest identified in their terminal research. Mallonee's capstone heavily focused more on the desire to understand what role local arts organizations play in community identity. That focus was defined through four sub-questions, and was the filter for five topics that were thoroughly discussed within the paper: 1) urban revitalization, 2) social capital and civic engagement, 3) community cultural development, 4) community cultural planning, and 5) assessment. The purpose of the capstone was to "understand the role of community arts organizations, specifically civic engagement and education initiatives, in community identity and grassroots community revitalization." (Mallonee, 2010) She discussed the how arts have been recognized as a method for community revitalization but there are many challenges to this. Local arts organizations are in a unique place to maintain the vitality of community identity and sustainability. Therefore, her research is grounded in the environment of the community arts organization.

For each of the five areas that were explored in relation to her question, Mallonee integrated literature review with information from three capstone courses (Community Cultural

Development, Community Cultural Planning, and Public Folklore & Community Programming). She then supplemented that research with case study analysis of successful community art projects to illustrate each section and to connect theory with practice. She asked questions within each section related to the overall topic. She also, like Barrett, outlined her assumptions, limitations and biases. She recognized that, due to the nature of the capstone, she did not conduct field research and therefore her research may be limited by the absence of testimonial interviews of field professionals.

Mallonee was able to make many connections between all of the material, utilizing existing literature, but also evaluating successful case studies and bringing in her experiences with the topics from capstone courses in order to develop an individualized analysis that can contribute to research in this area. She mentioned that while there is a lot of evidence of the economic impact of large budget activities in creating jobs, and attracting tourists and investment, little has been done to look at the local impact of small budget activities. Her capstone emphasized the environment of local communities that enables small-budget arts activities and the possibilities that exist for improvement.

After analyzing and comparing these two projects I feel much more comfortable not only with the structure of what a final research paper should look like but with research methods, how to choose and employ those methods and the different ways that research methodologies can answer similar questions. Research is most definitely a flexible and relative process that depends on the interests of the researcher, the question being asked and the results that they hope to achieve. Its outcomes vary as widely as its inspirations, but there is a methodological process that, while flexible, exists to ensure validity and credibility.

References

Barrett, S. C. (2013) *The Community Arts Programs of the Cooperative Extension Service: Comparative Study of Arts Initiatives in Kentucky and Wisconsin*. Eugene, OR: University of Oregon.

Mallonee, L. D. (2010) *Capturing Community Value: The Role of Arts Organizations in Revitalization, Civic Engagement, and Community Building*. Eugene, OR: University of Oregon.