Program in Quantitative Social Science

Thesis Experience, 2019

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Howdy -- I'm Evan, a '19 QSS major who wrote my thesis with Professor Mia Costa in the Government department.

What I did

My thesis examined the effects of the words "addict" and "substance use disorder" on perceptions of people who use drugs as well as on attitudes about drug policy. My thesis involved two survey experiments. In one experiment, participants viewed randomly generated profiles of job candidates -- some of whom were labeled as "addict" and others as "person with substance use disorder" -- and then answered how likely they would be to hire each candidate as their coworker. In another experiment, participants viewed a news article that described people who use heroin as either "addicts" or "people with substance use disorders" and then asked respondents to express their support for punitive and treatment-oriented drug policies.

Why I did it

As opioid overdoses spiked during my sophomore and junior year at Dartmouth, New Hampshire had the second highest overdose rate in the nation. Talking to folks in Hanover showed me how many lives the opioid crisis has touched. I wanted to do research to help further our understanding of the opioid crisis, so I spent my junior winter documenting opioid prescribing at the Dartmouth Institute for Health Policy and Clinical Practice. During my senior year, I worked on a project with Professor Brendan Nyhan and QSS post-doctoral fellow Jin Woo Kim that turned into a paper on legislative responsiveness to drug crises. My thesis was a way to explore the opioid crisis at a more personal level. Doctors and harm reduction activists argue that the language we use to talk about people who use drugs can have a tangible impact on stigma and drug policy support. I wanted to know -- is this true?

What I found

Stigma toward people who use drugs is high, and these beliefs are difficult to change. There is no evidence that labeling someone an addict or a person with substance use disorder changes the overall level of stigma they face. But there are differences by party: Republicans show lower levels of stigma toward a person labeled as having a substance use disorder than someone labeled as an addict. There is also no evidence that seeing the label "addict" or "person with substance use disorder" in a news story affects general support for addressing the opioid crisis or support for treatment policies. However, exposure to the label "person with

substance use disorder" decreases support for punitive policies and decreases levels of blame and dehumanization toward people who use drugs. Bottom line: labels for people who usedrugs may affect levels of stigma and policy support but in a more limited sense than was previously understood.

What would I tell other people doing a thesis?

- Ask yourself why you're doing a thesis. There will be significant tradeoffs -- writing a thesis will take a lot of time and will get in the way of other things you want to do during your senior year, so you want to make sure that the personal payoff for finishing the thesis is big enough to be worth it

- Ask a small research question. As much methodological training as you have, your abilities as an undergraduate researcher are still quite limited compared to everyone else doing research in your field. Don't doubt yourself -- you will have a lot of time and a lot of good people in your corner -- but also don't bite off more than you can chew

- Make sure your data exists and you can access it on a reasonable timeline. No data = no project

- Start early! Everyone will tell you this, but it really does make a big difference. I got a good amount of work done in the fall because I knew I would have another big project to work on in the winter. Although I still ran into a time crunch in the spring, the work I did in the fall put me in a much better position than I would have otherwise been in

- Find an adviser who's well-matched to you and your project. Things to be aware of: the professor's availability, the alignment of your topic and methods with their own research, personality match, etc.

- Balance your advisers' feedback as well as you can. Many people will have multiple streams of input on their project -- primarily the thesis adviser and the professor leading the QSS thesis program, but potentially other professors and graduate students. I tend to think the more feedback the better, but be aware that it gets hard when advisers start to say conflicting things. In that case, use your judgment and don't be afraid of offending anyone. It's your project!