

Research Award Application Reflective Essay

Current word count: 981

As a student in Academic Writing, we were encouraged to identify a topic that was meaningful, substantive, and contentious. Since the onset of my freshman year of college, I've sought to broadly understand the state of HIV education within the United States and focus on how to curate a comprehensive and accessible curriculum. Specifically, as a technologist, I was curious about educational accessibility within the context of digital accessibility. My personal research throughout freshman and sophomore year culminated in The Caring Project (<http://www.caringthebot.com/>). This project provides 20+ non-digital resources that range from pamphlets to quizzes to posters to supplement the main focus of the project: a chatbot that develops a comprehensive HIV curriculum through guided interactions within the platform on topics such as prevention, living with HIV, and basic information, among others. This initial research, though grounded in a more technical frame of reference, helped me effectively scope this research project. In order to identify my specific research topic, I conducted a deliberately extensive preliminary literature review to see what arguments are most relevant to the topic of comprehensive sexual education. From my initial research review, I realized that there were specific programs - such as the program Big Decisions, which I examined in the abstinence-plus section, Teen PEP, which I examined in the peer-to-peer education section, and Emerging Answers, which I explored in the abstinence-only section - that all represented fundamentally different approaches evaluated on the basis on whether they significantly changed the attitudes, intentions, and behaviors of participants. By focusing on these three areas, which can be accurately and appropriately operationalized through tailored questions assessed in pre and post-program quizzes, I could both evaluate the efficacy of specific programs and extrapolate insights from these program analyses to an assessment of the approach as a whole.

Ultimately, finding sources was an iterative process. First, I used Academic Search Ultimate to explore existing education research on comprehensive sexual education, specifically using the ERIC database for my initial search. Upon developing a better understanding of the direction of my project, I made more extensive use of the controlled vocabulary available in the "Subject" category and imposed filters on my search so that I'd only retrieve information on high school sexual education. I also identified relevant literature through several other databases; namely, APA PsycInfo and JSTOR. Throughout the writing process, I returned to this original list of papers and investigated literature that cited papers from this list. Doing so helped me in subsequent search iterations, as comprehensive sexual education was associated with several different terms (such as abstinence-plus education) based on the database I was searching. Additionally, my Academic Writing professor, Radford Skudrna, helped underscore the value of rigorously scoping my topic to avoid moral, religious, and ethical discussions that often permeate conversations around sexual education. Professor Skudrna helped me formulate the specific questions that I could reasonably answer through the process of identifying relevant staseis around my central topic. The topic of comprehensive sexual education is notably divisive, and

creating questions that reframed the debate around the efficacy of the three most prominent approaches - abstinence-only, peer-to-peer, and abstinence-plus - also helped in critically evaluating the objectiveness and relevance of different sources. First, I looked at the number of times the article was cited as well as the related citations (a strategy that I learned from Rachel Gammons is called “citation chaining”). Second, I looked for a clear method for quantifying the success of the program in influencing the three attributes I was interested in - attitudes, intentions, and behaviors of participants. For instance, I noticed in my initial literature search that authors such as Stanger-Hall et. al, Fields et. al, and Realini et. al chose to quantify the success of programs using appropriate pre and post tests. Their subsequent discussion of qualitative data collected during interviews with participants was enriched and grounded by the quantitative data derived from test results. Upon identifying the metrics that the authors used to evaluate the success of sexual education programs, I would consider whether these metrics pertained specifically to the three general themes that I had decided to explore in my research paper. To do so, I would closely examine how the authors framed these metrics in their assessment of a program’s efficacy. For example, how did Realini contextualize the results from questions on pre and post tests about clear communication with sexual partners about condom use and contraceptives? Through reading their discussion, I found that Realini explored this metric in the context of self-efficacy. Like the authors, I argued that changes in one’s self-efficacy and confidence toward their sexual health was a significant determinant in future sexual *behaviors*.

Ultimately, throughout the research process, I learned about the importance of finding room within my own argument to critically rebuke others. In my first draft, I tried to give what I perceived was a fair analysis of each argument - even those that I disagreed with. But, my professor helped me realize that tying in points that support each individual argument but don’t relate to the overarching theme of my paper only takes up space for further supporting my overall case. For instance, I initially included information about the moral arguments commonly raised during discussions related to abstinence-only programs. Though this might’ve been support for the abstinence-only programs section, it was irrelevant to my overall case - which deliberately did not discuss moral quandaries. Because I focused each discussion of other arguments within the context of my overall case, my paper was more cohesive and necessary contrasts between the raised program options were clarified. As I move forward in my undergraduate career, I will actively foster this commitment to fair, logical, and cohesive coverage of diverse points of view in my research.