



GRADUATE PERSPECTIVE

LESSONS FROM EMBRACING THE UNKNOWN

PROPOSING & CONDUCTING PRE-DISSERTATION RESEARCH

Writing a research proposal is writing about the unknown. This is especially true for predissertation projects, which provide doctoral students with place-based insights to facilitate the development of feasible research questions for a successful dissertation. Predissertation work helps students in interdisciplinary conservation programs foster understanding of local conservation issues and establish cross-discipline collaborations. However, planning and funding are required to do predissertation work, which means that proposals need to be written and research questions posed. The challenge of proposing predissertation research, in part, is coming up with initial research questions to develop viable, future research questions.

As a first-year graduate student, I experienced doubts that come with proposing research yet-to-be-conducted. My preliminary research would be in Brazil, an area of the world I knew little about; in Portuguese, a language I had never studied; and on water management, a topic I was just beginning to learn about. Throughout the proposal-writing process, and even during my time in the field, I doubted my research interests, questioned what I was doing, and considered going in a completely different direction. An inherent trust in trying something new helped me to better define my research interests, as I continue to carve out my path toward a dissertation project.

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From Unknown To Opportunity

In fall 2017, I started my PhD studies in Anthropology and Integrative Conservation (ICON) at the University of Georgia (UGA) without a clear idea of what or where I wanted to study. ICON is an interdisciplinary program among the departments of anthropology, geography, forestry, and ecology. The program encourages students to explore complex conservation challenges from multiple perspectives. When I applied to UGA, I had originally proposed to do research in Spain, where I had lived since graduating from the University of Michigan. However, I later decided that for my dissertation, I wanted to expand my understanding of diverse cultures and how people relate to their environment beyond my second home in Spain. So, I spent my first year of graduate school trying not to worry about lacking a research focus and at the same time, managing the implicit pressure of coming up with a topic.

But ultimately, a doctoral student must decide on a research topic. So, how could I come up with that idea? In my case, the answer ended up entailing choosing something and going with it—reading the literature and seeing where it could take me.

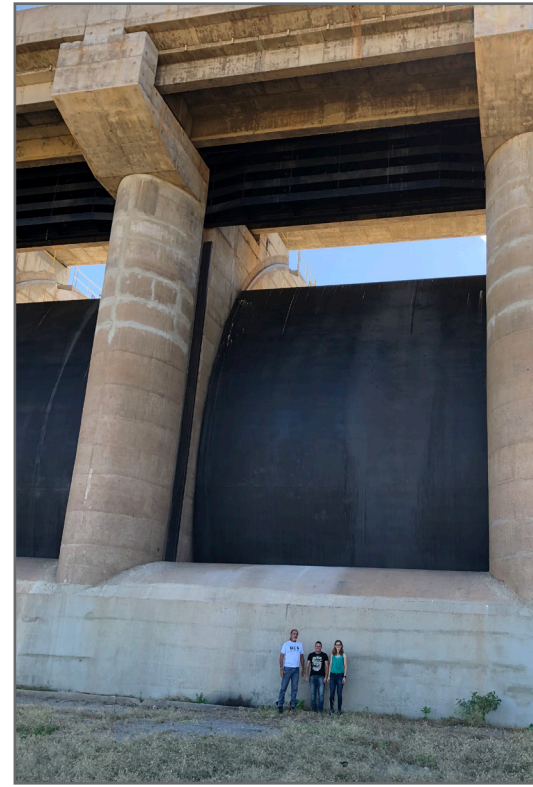
During my first semester, my advisor offered me the opportunity to collaborate on an interdisciplinary project that was investigating water management in Brazil. I developed a comprehensive literature review on adaptive management to identify the characteristics of water management systems we would analyze. The project provided me with a potential place to conduct

my dissertation research, as well as an initial direction to formulate my own research ideas.

As I worked on the water-management project, I began to see how one of the topics I identified, the role of different types of knowledge in decision-making, reflected my general research interests. I read how scientific knowledge is generally prioritized over local knowledge in decision-making, which influences how decisions are made and whose voices are heard in this process. In a decisive conversation with my advisor, in which I proposed to explore the types of scientific information used in Brazilian water-management decisions, Brazil went from a potential place to do research to a definite one; the question went from what would I study and where to how.

My advisor and I agreed that going Brazil over the summer would give me important place-based, understanding of the country I had, up until that point, only read about. Because I did not speak Portuguese, a logical course of action was to spend the summer learning Portuguese, and I therefore applied for UGA's summer Foreign Language Areas Study (FLAS) fellowship to do an intensive Portuguese language course in southeast Brazil.

At the same time, my advisor suggested that I try to get funding to visit Ceará, in northeast Brazil, where my future research would be based. So, I applied for three predissertation research grants. Before I submitted these proposals, however, I found out that I was not awarded the FLAS scholarship, which fundamentally changed my summer plans. On one hand, I would not be doing the language studies I had counted on. On the other hand, I could spend more



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time engaged in actual research. As I expanded my proposals, though, it bothered me that the language I was using seemed to convey more confidence than I really felt about the “risk assessments” and “water allocation scenarios” I was proposing to study.

When I brought up my doubts to my advisor, he told me that if I already understood everything, I would not be proposing research to study these topics. Conversations with others in the ICON program helped me understand that while my professors and fellow PhD students agreed that writing research proposals is writing about the unknown, within the proposals themselves, the unknown is typically unspoken and implicit. At the same time, the process of writing and rewriting my summer research proposals helped me identify more specifically how my research could fill a gap in knowledge and also what I would need to learn in order to answer my overarching question of how scientific knowl-

edge was developed, shared, and used in water-management decisions in Ceará, Brazil. My research plan emerged through the proposal-writing process; by the time I submitted my proposal I was able to visualize my future research.

In the end, I was fortunate to receive the funding necessary to carry out my proposed research. I was heading to Brazil! However, the realization that I would actually be going to Fortaleza to do the research I had proposed made me question the confidence I had gained while crafting my research questions and methods. I felt fear of going to an unknown, potentially dangerous, place with no local contacts.

Two UGA-based encounters—and the relationships that subsequently developed—helped transform my fears into excitement to immerse myself in Brazilian culture and water management. First, in April, I met Amanda, a PhD student originally from Fortaleza who had come UGA to work with my advisor for a

week. About six weeks later, Amanda and I would meet again, but this time in Brazil. Although Amanda was living in São Paulo, she happened to be visiting her family during my first month in Fortaleza. Over the course of that month, Amanda treated me like part of her family and helped me acclimate to life in her city. Before leaving UGA for the summer, though, I also met Dr. Eduardo Martins, the president of the Cearense Foundation for Meteorology and Water Resources (FUNCEME), who was visiting UGA to discuss collaborative projects with my advisor. I had the opportunity to meet with Dr. Martins to explain the focus of my research, which he found interesting. When I brought up my concerns about working in Fortaleza, Dr. Martins offered support, a workspace at FUNCEME, and help establishing connections in other state agencies, which would be necessary to carry out the research I proposed.

Three weeks later, and feeling a mix of excitement and fear, I arrived in Fortaleza. The support from FUNCEME was fundamental as I adjusted to the tropical humidity of northeast Brazil. Yet, the first two weeks of my stay still proved challenging. For example, I quickly learned that running at midday was only a thing a naive foreigner would do. At the same time, I feared that my limited Portuguese would be a barrier to any research I proposed, research for which I realized I did not know where to start.

Feeling overwhelmed by these initial challenges, I returned to my research plan and remembered that facing the unknown was part of the process. Eventually, things started falling into place. My Spanish helped me to cultivate a sufficient level of Portuguese to understand the meetings I attended and to actively participate in conversations. Additionally, Dr. Martins

helped me schedule interviews and facilitated my visits to field sites outside of Fortaleza, while a researcher at FUNCEME became my go-to for everyday doubts. At the same time, outside of research life, I joined a running group and soon felt part of a close-knit community in an initially isolating city.

On the plane ride back to United States, I was already looking forward to my next time in Fortaleza. During my two months in Brazil, I not only investigated the research questions I had proposed but also established contacts at state agencies, within the river-basin committees, and at different universities. These contacts facilitated my research over the summer and will be fundamental as I pursue further research in the region. Every conversation, encounter, and experience I had during my fieldwork has contributed to my overall perception of the culture of Ceará. I more intimately understand how water-related conflicts and inequalities permeate daily life in the region. An inherent trust in trying something new guided me as I wrote my proposals and ventured off to Ceará. It also helped me to develop a deep appreciation for the Brazilian landscape where I will continue to work and learn over the course of my graduate studies.

The process of proposing and carrying out predissertation research makes the unknown a little more familiar. At the same time, predissertation research enhances interdisciplinary doctoral research by providing students with the opportunity to foster local collaborations and to gain a deeper understanding of local conservation issues. Because of my experience this summer, and as my dissertation proposal evolves, I am more equipped to propose to study new unknowns, which is what research is all about.

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