CURRICULUM FOR PUBLIC POLICY AND ADMINISTRATION
SPECIALIZED KNOWLEDGE AREA MODULE 7
RESEARCH FOCUS

Introduction

Based on background and specific dissertation objectives, students often have very unique research needs. Specialized Knowledge Area Module (KAM) 7 has been specifically designed to provide students with three options to meet these different needs. It is the most flexible KAM and can be used to develop essential skills like scholarly writing, critical thinking, problem solving, that might hamper students in their success in doing doctoral-level work. It can also be used to enable a student to get very specific information in the area of their research interest either through courses, writing a KAM or directed studies. What does NOT fulfill KAM 7 is an eclectic set of elective courses with no focus on the student’s research interest.

Faculty Mentors have the responsibility and authority to determine, with the student, which option a student will use to fulfill KAM 7. If a mentor determines that a student will benefit from essential skills courses such as advanced writing or critical thinking skills, then the approved courses should be taken in advance of other KAMs and as early in the student’s program as is feasible. If KAM 7 is to be used for in-depth learning around a student’s research interests it should be done during or after KAMs 5 and 6. The student would develop a learning contract which provides the rationale for selecting a particular option describes how it fits their research agenda and outlines what outcomes and deliverables will be required to meet the terms and conditions of the learning contract.
The three options are:

- **Traditional KAM.** Students may write a traditional KAM related to their intended dissertation research topic. The KAM may be used to explore the literature in their area of interest as a way to “ground” the research. The intent is not for KAM 7 to replace the in-depth review of the literature that is required in a dissertation, but to help the student gain a better understanding of the topic so that a prospectus can be developed.

- **Course Substitutions.** With the approval of their faculty mentor, students may take three related graduate-level courses from the School of Public Policy and Administration (SPPA) or other Walden schools that support the student’s research or career needs. (These courses are in addition to 3 specialization courses required in the course part of the mixed model PPA program).

- **Directed Studies.** This option may be fulfilled through any combination of courses or independent studies as identified by either the student or faculty mentor as necessary to write KAMs or complete the dissertation. For example, if a mentor feels that a student needs more advanced writing or critical thinking skills, the mentor can “direct” the student to take a course (courses are currently being developed through the Office of Student Support) or do an independent study in these areas. See Option III under Part I for further details.

KAM 7 is different from KAMs 5 and 6 in that the faculty mentor is the key decision-maker on how this KAM should be fulfilled. The faculty mentor may direct the student to take skill-building courses (advanced graduate writing, critical thinking skills and
advanced research methods), independent studies, or write a traditional research design KAM

For the KAM 7 options that are NOT the traditional research design KAM, a student must write a learning agreement/contract that provides a strong, literature-based rationale for selecting that option and an explanation of how the option will support their research interest. For options that are faculty mentor directed, the faculty mentor must provide a written rationale to the student identifying the skill that needs to be enhanced and the particular option and activity he or she is prescribing to address the need. These documents along with a revised POS must be approved by the student’s faculty mentor and submitted to the academic advising unit in the School of Public Policy and Administration.

Topics

To understand these options, this description is divided into the following two parts:

- Part I: Description of the three options
- Part II: Guidelines for KAM 7 focused on Research Design.

Special Note: The overall title for this specialized KAM 7 is Research Focus. The title for the traditional KAM option is KAM 7 Research Design.
Part I

Description of the Four Options

Option One: Traditional KAM

In this option, the student completes a traditional KAM that is focused on the specific research method or a very focused aspect of their topic selected by the student for his/her dissertation. The KAM is designed to assure the student thoroughly understands the appropriateness and effectiveness of their proposed dissertation research methodology or to enable a student to do in depth study of the literature around specific aspects of their dissertation topic. When focused on the research method, the Breadth portion of KAM 7 compares and contrasts the selected method against other research methods. The Depth portion presents the strengths and weaknesses of the selected method and outlines key steps that must be taken to ensure successful use of the approach. Depending upon the method, the Depth portion may also include the traditional Annotated Bibliography addressing recent uses of this technique. The student’s faculty mentor or faculty assessor, whoever reviews the KAM, determines the need for an Annotated Bibliography. The Application portion provides the details of how the selected method will be specifically used in the student’s research.

When focused upon a specific aspect of the student’s dissertation topic, it should follow the form of other KAMs, highlighting key theorists in the topic, looking at recent research in the topic and applying this information to a real world application. Example: A student may be interested in using the phenomenology research method for his/her dissertation; and the student wants to understand the foundation theories, strengths and weaknesses, and details for implementing this approach. In this case, the student
would write a traditional KAM using the KAM 7 Research Design guideline included as Part II of this document. The student’s faculty mentor or faculty assessor would approve the completion of the KAM.

Approval: No special approvals are needed for this option. The student’s POS must, however, reflect the completion of KAM 7.

Option Two: Course Substitutions

The second option available to students is the completion of three graduate-level courses. In this option, the student may select three graduate-level courses aligned with the student's research interests from within SPPA or combine courses from other Walden University schools. This option is offered for students whose research requires them to examine areas where the student needs more in-depth academic background in their research topic. A student may not substitute courses for KAM 7 until they have been assigned a faculty mentor and the faculty mentor has approved the course substitutions.

Examples: A student’s research in financial stability in nonprofits may require understanding the financial underpinnings of an organization; yet the student may not have had sufficient financial training in his/her undergraduate and graduate schooling. In this case, the student may select to take three on-line courses in the School of Management’s MBA program. The student could take the following three advanced electives in finance:

- MMBA 6201 Corporate Finance
- MMBA 6202 Financial Institutions and Markets
- MMBA 6203 Case Study: Financial Modeling
Approvals: To substitute three graduate-level courses for KAM VII, the student must obtain the approval of his/her faculty mentor. A student must write a learning agreement with a strong rationale based upon the literature for selecting that option and an explanation of how the option will support their research interest. This document must be approved by the student’s faculty mentor and should be submitted along with a revised POS to a SPPA Academic Advisor for the student’s file.

Note: The student must verify if there are prerequisites for the courses and address them, if necessary.

Special Note: There is a requirement that all students within the School of Public Policy and Administration mixed model doctoral program complete a minimum of two KAMs. This option is not available to students, if the selection of this option drops the student to less than two KAMs. Students in the KAM-based program must complete a minimum of three KAMs of which KAM 7 must be one of the three KAMs.

Option Three: Directed Studies

This option may be fulfilled through any combination of courses or independent studies as identified by either the student or faculty mentor as necessary to write KAMs or complete the dissertation. For example, if a mentor feels that a student needs more advanced writing or critical thinking skills, the mentor can “direct” the student to take a course (courses are currently being developed through the Office of Student Support) or do an independent study in these areas. This recommendation would be made if a faculty mentor determines that a student’s skills need to be enhanced in an area that is essential to being successful in a doctoral program. The Office of Student Development has developed a series of skill-enhancement courses that are available to all Walden
students. These courses focus on different levels of writing, critical thinking/logic skills, creative thinking/problem solving skills, all skills that are needed to effectively do research and doctoral level thinking. Based on the mentor’s assessment of a student’s writing skills, the faculty mentor can recommend SBSF 6000: Graduate Writing, a course that focuses on grammar, syntax and establishing a logical flow of ideas and SBSF 8650: Advanced Graduate Writing which focuses on scholarly writing skills and the writing and thinking skills to write a literature review. If a student needs help in demonstrating their analysis and critical thinking through their writing, SBSF 6101: Critical Thinking/Logic would be recommended.

There are also focused doctoral level courses in qualitative research and quantitative research methods available in the Ph.D. program in the School of Education. Many SPPA students seem to lean to preferring to use qualitative research methods in their research and dissertations, yet have only a surface understanding of the variety and application of these methodologies. These students might be guided to take a qualitative (or quantitative) research course as part of fulfilling KAM 7. If a mentor feels a student needs some additional skills in any these areas in order to effectively do doctoral level work in our programs, he or she can guide their student to take these courses. Three such courses will fulfill KAM 7 requirements.

If a student intends to use qualitative or quantitative research methods but is not knowledgeable about how these methodologies can be applied, a faculty mentor might direct the student to do independent study where the student would take an in-depth look at how these methods can be applied. For example, the student could pilot test the qualitative method of phenomenology by designing a mini study related to their research
interest. This would allow the student to examine closely the kinds of studies that have used the method, how to design a study using the method, issues of data collection and data management, data analysis, validity and reliability, etc. by designing. Or, a student who plans to use a survey in their dissertation research may do an independent study on survey design and test their ideas for survey questions. Students would register for PPA 8840 to complete the independent study. The demonstration of mastery would be a 30-page paper equivalent in size and content to a breadth portion of a traditional KAM. Independent studies must be carried out under the guidance of a faculty member (mentor or assessor) with expertise in the identified area of study.

If a mentor recognizes a deficit in any of these skills, particularly those in writing, critical thinking or problem solving, he or she should direct the student to take those courses as soon as possible.

Approvals: To substitute a combination of independent study papers and graduate-level courses (totally a value of 12 credits) for KAM 7, the student must obtain the approval of his/her faculty mentor. A student must write a learning agreement with a strong rationale based upon the literature for selecting that option and an explanation of how the option will support their research interest. This document must be approved by the student’s faculty mentor and should be submitted along with a revised POS to a SPPA Academic Advisor for the student’s file. If the faculty mentor is directing a student toward this option, the faculty mentor will forward to the student in writing an explanation of the skill area that needs enhancement and recommend corrective action.
Note: The student must verify if there are prerequisites for the courses and address them, if necessary.

Special Note: There is a requirement that all students within the School of Public Policy and Administration mixed model doctoral program complete a minimum of two KAMs. This option is not available to students, if the selection of this option drops the student to less than two KAMs. Students in the KAM-based track must write a minimum of three KAMs of which KAM 7 must be one of them.

Part II

SPECIALIZED KNOWLEDGE AREA MODULE 7

RESEARCH DESIGN

Introduction

According to Leedy and Ormrod (2005), “research is a systematic process of collecting, analyzing, and interpreting information (data) in order to increase our understanding of the phenomenon about which we are interested or concerned” (p. 2).

The purpose of KAM 7 Research Design is to provide the doctoral students with an opportunity to study one or more research methods in depth in preparation for his/her dissertation research. To that end, this curriculum guide presents an overview of research paradigms, descriptions of a number of research methods, and several options for fulfilling the requirements of this KAM.

Research Paradigms

Kuhn (1962/1996) defined paradigms as “accepted examples of actual scientific practice... (that) provides models from which spring particular coherent traditions of
scientific research” (p. 10). These paradigms, which reflect the researchers’ worldviews or belief systems, guide them in their choice of research methods.

Three important research paradigms are (a) the positivist/empiricist orientation, which supports the use of quantitative methods, (b) the constructivist/naturalist worldview, which supports the use of qualitative methods, and (c) the pragmatic model, which supports the use of quantitative, qualitative, or a combination or mix of both methods as dictated by the research questions (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 1998, p. 3).

Briefly stated, positivists believe that cause and effect can be isolated and measured in an objective, value-free, manner. They use quantitative methods, such as experiments, surveys, and statistical analyses of existing data, to provide evidence to support various hypotheses (deductions) derived logically from their theories of how the world works. “This position is sometimes called the “scientific method” (Creswell, 2003, p. 6).

Conversely, constructivists believe that scientific inquiry is by nature subjective, since researchers have values which unavoidably affect/bias their research and the interpretation of their findings. Because all reality is subjective or personal, constructivists believe that researchers must construct meaning from the particulars of a situation. Hence, they use open-ended, qualitative methods, such as case studies, grounded theory, ethnography (the study of a culture or social group), and phenomenology, to collect in-depth information about the participants and develop theories (by induction) to explain the situations or phenomena they study (Creswell, 1998, 2003).
The basis of the mixed-methods approach is the pragmatists’ view that the questions addressed by the research should dictate the research method(s) used, not the worldview of the researcher or the belief that one method is superior to another (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 1998). Hence, a pragmatist chooses from the array of quantitative and qualitative research methods available those that will provide the best possible answers to the research questions. Often, this involves the use of both qualitative and quantitative methods, such as in a grounded survey. In a grounded survey, initial, in-depth interviews with selected individuals in the target population might suggest important questions for inclusion in a questionnaire subsequently administered to a larger sample of the population.

Research Methods

This section contains brief descriptions of twelve important research methods. The goal is to assist students in their initial selection of a research method(s), not to provide a complete explication of research methods or a comprehensive treatment of any particular method. The primary research methods covered are listed below:

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a) Experimental Research

Singleton and Straits (1999) defined the experimental research method as follows:

The key features of the experimental approach are manipulation and control. To test hypotheses, the experimenter deliberately introduces changes into the environment…and observes or measures the effects of the changes. Because greater control is exercised over the conditions of observation than in any other research strategy, experiments more effectively eliminate the possibility of extraneous variables offering alternative interpretations of research findings. For this reason, experimental studies have long been regarded as the optimal way to test causal hypotheses. (p. 179)

b) Quasi-Experimental Research

Campbell and Stanley (1963) explained why quasi-experimental designs are sometimes used in quantitative research:

There are many natural social settings in which the research person can introduce something like experimental design into his scheduling of data collection procedures (e.g., the when and to whom of measurement) even
though he lacks the full control over the scheduling of experimental stimuli (the when and to whom of exposure and the ability to randomize exposures) which makes a true experiment possible. Collectively, such situations can be regarded as quasi-experimental designs. (p. 34)

The interrupted time-series design, in which the treatment is either introduced by the researcher or results from some naturally occurring intervention, and the multiple time-series design, in which the researcher compares a time series for participants exposed to a treatment to one in which they were not, are two examples of quasi-experimental designs (Singleton & Straits, 1999, pp. 226-229).

c) Survey Research

Leedy and Ormrod (2005) provided a definition of this common research method:

Survey research involves acquiring information about one or more groups of people—perhaps about their characteristics, opinions, attitudes, or previous experiences—by asking them questions and tabulating their answers. The ultimate goal is to learn about a large population by surveying a sample of that population. (p. 183)

Researchers typically administer surveys in face-to-face or telephone interviews or by paper-and-pencil or electronic questionnaires. As with all quantitative research, the validity and reliability of the survey instrument are key considerations in survey research. "Validity refers to the extent to which an empirical measure adequately reflects the real meaning of the concept under consideration" (Babbie, 1990, p. 133), and "reliability is a matter of whether a particular technique, applied repeatedly to the same object, would yield the same result each time" (Babbie, 1990, p. 132).
d) Existing Data Research

Babbie (1990) suggested that, "scientific research should not be equated with the collection and analysis of original data. In fact, some research topics can be examined through analysis of data [that has] already been collected and compiled" (p. 31). If the data bears directly on the research questions, the researcher saves time and money. So why not use it?

The Federal government (e.g., the Bureau of Labor Statistics and various Federal agencies) is one of the main sources of such secondary or existing data. Many of these public use data sets are available on the Internet. Also, private organizations sometimes capture relevant data in their records, although access may be restricted.

e) Causal-Comparative Research

Also called "ex post facto" research, causal-comparative research examines existing data in an attempt to find a statistically significant relationship between an independent and dependent variable. The key to this method is the matching of participants in the test and control groups based on pre-treatment attributes. Since the researcher does this after the fact, the selection and assignment are not random. Hence, the causal-comparative research design is not a true experimental design. The following example illustrates how to apply this research method.

Campbell and Stanley (1963, p.70) described a "typical ex post facto study" in which the researchers attempted to test the hypothesis that individuals who completed high school were more successful than those who did not. School records provided the data for matching the individuals in the test and control groups. Everyone in the test
This is what the researcher found:

Initially, the data showed those completing high school to have been more successful but also to have higher marks in grammar school, higher parental occupations, younger ages, better neighborhoods, etc. Thus, the antecedents might have caused both completion of high school and later success. (Campbell & Stanley, 1963, p. 70)

Causal-comparative research is useful in situations where experimental designs are not possible. However, since it is not a true experimental design, the researcher must be cautious when interpreting the findings.

f) Meta-Analysis

A relatively new research method, having originated with the work of Glass (1976), meta-analysis is gaining in popularity:

The value of empirical management research is profoundly augmented if it enables its readers to infer credible scientific generalizations that can inform management practice. Such generalizations are best based on meta-analyses...Meta-analysis is a method of reviewing a domain of published scientific literature and quantitatively determining the degree to which a particular finding has been successfully replicated. Meta-analysis extends knowledge by clarifying and synthesizing research findings. (Eden, 2002, p. 841)

"Meta-analysis can be best understood as a form of survey research in which research reports, rather than people, are surveyed" (Lipsey & Wilson, 2001, p. 1).
Some of the strengths of meta-analysis as a research method (Lipsey and Wilson, 2001, pp. 5-7) include (a) the discipline it imposes through the use of documented, structured methods for selecting primary studies, coding the measures of interest, and analyzing and interpreting the data, (b) the quantification it provides of aggregate measures of the magnitude and direction of the findings of the empirical studies included in the meta-analysis sample space, and (c) its much greater statistical power, due to the much larger sample size of the collective studies in the meta-analysis.

However, some of the weaknesses of meta-analysis, which a researcher must address, (Lipsey and Wilson, 2001, pp. 7-10) include (a) the amount of effort it takes, (b) the highly structured nature of the method, which makes it less sensitive to the nuances of the primary studies, and (c) the criticism that combining the findings of diverse studies is like mixing "apples and oranges." Finally, as a practical matter for a doctoral student considering this research approach, it is important to note that meta-analysis requires the use of sophisticated statistical methods.

**g) Evaluation Research**

Evaluation research, also known as program research, is a form of applied research used to evaluate the effectiveness of social programs or interventions (Babbie, 2001). The topics appropriate to evaluation research are limitless. When the federal government abolished the selective service system (the draft), military researchers began paying special attention to the impact on enlistment. As individual states have legalized marijuana, researchers have sought to learn the consequences, both for marijuana use and other forms of social behavior. (Babbie, 2001, p. 333)
Evaluation research uses quantitative methods, such as experimental, quasi-experimental, and time-series designs, as well as qualitative methods, such as in-depth interviews and focus groups. "The most effective evaluation research is one that combines qualitative and quantitative components. While making statistical comparisons is useful, so is gaining an in-depth understanding of the processes producing the results—or preventing the expected results from appearing" (Babbie, 2001, p. 344).

h) Case Study

Creswell (1998) described a case study as "an exploration of a 'bounded system' or a case (or multiple cases) over time through detailed, in-depth data collection involving multiple sources of information rich in context" (p. 61). While case studies are often used in exploratory research, they can also be used in explanatory and descriptive research:

Many social scientists still deeply believe that case studies are only appropriate for the exploratory phase of an investigation, that surveys and histories are appropriate for the descriptive phase, and that experiments are the only way of doing explanatory or causal inquiries…case studies are far from being only an exploratory strategy. Some of the best case studies have been both explanatory case studies…and descriptive case studies. (Yin, 2003, p. 3)

Thus, the case study as a research method is different from an educational case study designed for classroom discussion. Whereas the latter is a teaching tool, the goal of the
case study is "to expand and generalize theories (analytic generalization) and not to enumerate frequencies (statistical generalization)" (Yin, 2003).

i) Phenomenology

"Whereas a biography reports the life of a single individual, a phenomenological study describes the meaning of the lived experiences for several individuals about a concept or the phenomenon" (Creswell, 2003, p. 51). For example, a researcher used phenomenology as a research method to study the "caring interaction" between nurse and patient (Creswell, 2003, p.31).

The goal of a phenomenological study is to understand "better the essential, invariant structure (or essence) of the experience, recognizing that a single unifying meaning of the experience exists" (Creswell, 2003, p. 55).

j) Grounded Theory

Strauss and Corbin (1998) described grounded theory as follows:

(Grounded theory is) theory that was derived from data, systematically gathered and analyzed through the research process. In this method, data collection, analysis, and eventual theory stand in close relationship to one another…Grounded theories, because are drawn from data, are likely to offer insight, enhance understanding, and provide a meaningful guide to action. (p. 12)

Creswell (2003, pp. 33-34) provided an example of a grounded theory study involving childhood sexual abuse in which the researchers used open-ended interviews and participant observation to discover the nature of the abuse and how the victims
survived. The goal of the study was to "develop grounded theory about the survival and coping strategies" of the 11 women who participated in the study.

k) Ethnography

According to Creswell (2003), "an ethnography is a description and interpretation of a cultural or social group or system. The researcher examines the group's observable and learned patterns of behavior, customs, and ways of life" (p. 58).

The focus of ethnography on describing the behavior of individuals or groups in a particular culture distinguishes it from other qualitative research methods. Creswell (2003) described an ethnographic study of the selection of a new principal for a public school in which the researcher focused on "the culture of the school at work in the activities of the Principal Selection Committee" (p.35).

l) Action Research

McNabb (2002) acknowledged Kurt Lewin, the renowned social psychologist, as the originator of the action research method:

The label "action research" was first used in 1948 by Kurt Lewin to describe an approach to solving practical problems in social groups…His approach was characterized by a combination of research and theory building…Lewin's perception of the change process included collaborative research between the social science researcher and the client. Lewin saw the method as empirical research—that is, an applied approach to social research, as opposed to a pure science or purely theoretical approach. (p. 345)
Action research is both collaborative and iterative. It is collaborative in that it directly involves both the researcher(s) and the members of the organization in the process. It is iterative in that it involves alternating cycles of data collection (research) and joint analysis, theorizing, strategizing, and intervention (action). Thus, research leads to action, which leads to more research, and the cycle continues.

m) Alternate Research Options

With approval of his/her faculty mentor, the student may also select another research method that meets the needs of the student’s research while maintaining a commitment to disciplined research methodology.

Research Strategy

The choice of research method is important. It is also multi-faceted, as suggested by Maxwell (1996). The essence of Maxwell's model, which applies to quantitative as well as qualitative research, is that research is an iterative process in which the purposes of the research, applicable theory, research questions, research methods, and requirements for validity interact to guide the researcher in developing a research design.

Learning Resources

A bibliography of possible references for this KAM can be found at the Walden Library site accessed through the faculty or student personal start page/campuscruiser. Once in the Walden Library site, click on Get KAM Research Help and look for the appropriate program or KAM. The Resources links will take you to general references that will provide an overview of the field or key thinkers. The Bibliography link will take you to a list of possible writings. The books and authors listed here are meant only to provide examples of the kind of literature you should be accessing. You can compile your
own bibliographic references using this list as a starting point. If you have difficulty compiling a bibliography or choosing relevant readings, consult with your faculty mentor or KAM assessor and the Walden librarians.