## Graduate Student Spotlight

**Getting to Know: Mandi Brunson**

Written by: Michelle Wooten (Ph.D. student in Educational Research)  
  
*Mandi Brunson is a doctoral candidate in Higher Education and is working toward her Qualitative Research Certificate at the University of Alabama. She is currently serving as the Qualitative Graduate Assistant in the College of Education's Research Assistance Center.*   
  
**You are in the Higher Education doctoral degree program and you decided to get the Qualitative Research Certificate.  What drew you to qualitative methods in general?**  
I started out thinking I would be quantitative.  When I was getting my Master’s degree I took statistics and really liked it.  Also, most of my professors used quantitative methods so it was what I knew.  I probably read articles that were using qualitative methods but I think I didn’t understand what they were doing – it didn’t seem rigorous, like the researchers were just ‘Oh, I talked to some people and came up with this idea.’ [laughs]  So when I started my doctorate I enrolled in more quantitative courses.   But when I signed up for my one required qualitative course in my doctorate work, I tried to keep an open mind for my dissertation.  I ended up really liking it, partly because you explore *why* you do things, at least the way they’re taught at UA.  We talk about philosophical paradigms and why chosen methods make sense, rather than just doing whatever the textbook says to do. It also focuses more on people’s stories – the individual.

With my own research with international studies, there have already been a lot of quantitative studies.  Statistics and numbers give us something meaningful, but in the end it’s just, ‘this percentage did this,’ or ‘*x* correlates to *y*.’  But I want to know the stories behind the numbers. I still like quantitative methods, and I’m not completely opposed to the other side – they both have a place and are important.   
  
I also want to add that one time in my Master’s when I was writing a paper, I asked a professor if I could write about my own experience – my reasons for studying it, etc.  I had never heard of a positionality statement, but I think that was basically what I was asking if I could do.  My teacher at the time said, “No, you can’t do that – that does not belong in academic writing.” So when I found out through my qualitative coursework that this is a thing, I was like, “Wait! I’ve already wanted to do this but I haven’t because I was told I wasn’t allowed to.”  But I think that is something that drew me to it because I was actually encouraged – given permission – to have a positionality statement or talk about my subjectivities.  
   
**So at the time you were taking this qualitative methods class, you were really close to doing your comps, right?  How did you find yourself able to do qualitative research among professors who were more quantitative research-oriented?**  
Right.  I think it’s something I still struggle with – a lot of the field is quantitative.  I think there is a bit of a challenge that what we do matters and that qualitative research can be rigorous, like the contentions I originally had.  I heard about the qualitative certificate when I was taking my first qualitative class and went to talk about it with my adviser, who was one of the two qualitative researchers in my program.  It turned out she also had wanted me to think about the certificate.  Since she was going on sabbatical the whole next year, I chose the other qualitative researcher in my program to be my chair.  The next semester I took two more qualitative studies.  Even though I am done with all my required Higher Education courses, and am working on my dissertation, I still have a few qualitative courses to take to satisfy the certificate.  It may be that I take those courses after I finish all my graduation requirements.  
   
**You can graduate and then get the certificate?**  
Yes, typically the certificate course ‘Field Experience’ is supposed to be for a pilot study before the dissertation, but for me it didn’t work out that way.  I think I will use it as my first study ‘post’ dissertation.  
   
**How do you feel the courses in the qualitative certificate have prepared you for doing a qualitative dissertation?**  
I think they have prepared me substantially.  The three-part qualitative series courses built on one other, and Qualitative III was especially important for me because we had to think through our philosophical paradigms, the methodologies, and why we do what we do. The way I structured Chapter 3 of my dissertation is starting with ‘here’s my philosophical paradigm’ followed by ‘here’s what makes sense in that paradigm.’  I think for people who haven’t had as many qualitative courses this might not be something they had to think through: instead of just reciting here’s what I am studying and my methods, I am writing, ‘here’s who I am philosophically, so here’s the approach that makes sense.’  Then every time I mention a method, I explain why that makes sense within the paradigm.  I would add that these courses also improved my writing quite a bit.   
   
**So why not just take Qualitative I, II, and III?  Why the certificate?**  
I want a faculty position when finish here, so I am hoping to market myself not just as a higher education expert, but as a methodologist.  I wouldn’t be opposed to having a job in an Educational Research department.  I have seen a couple of job announcements where they are looking for people who can do both of those things: qualitative methodologies and higher education.  I’ll have a strong CV and application for these because I can say I know a lot about methodology.