

Known Knowns... Known Unknowns... and Unknown Unknowns: Processing the Research Journey

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Abstract

Every now and then an outstanding mentor and/or faculty member comes along that has the uncanny ability to lift and inspire students beyond their imagined reach. Willson Williams is one such leader. This paper provides a brief overview of this faculty member's contributions to the field, as well as her outstanding leadership as both a professor, mentor, and Director of the Institutional Review Board.

Key Words: compassion, graduate education, Institutional Review Board, mentorship, Willson Williams

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Albert Einstein's quote on research is that "if we knew what we were doing, it would not be called research" (Albert Einstein, n.d., p. 3). Research is about identifying what we do know, what we don't know, and what we would like to know. Donald Rumsfeld, who was the United States Secretary of Defense, said at a press conference in reference to the complexity and plans of the Middle East war that, "There are known knowns; there are things we know we know. We also know there are known unknowns; that is to say we know there are some things we do not know. But there are also unknown unknowns – the ones we don't know we don't know" (United States Department of Defense, 2002, p. 1).

The sentiments of these words can be shared by many doctoral students going through the rigorous process of dissertation research. The complexity of the process is lessened by the help and support of a knowledgeable and perceptive mentor. When one pursues a dissertation, it is clear from the acknowledgements in this paper that a supportive professor or more, were influential in accomplishing this monumental endeavor.



Professor Willson Williams

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Dr. Willson Williams is one of those outstanding mentors who has shared her insights, knowledge, and support, to help many students meet their dreams for completing a doctoral degree. Presently, she is Director of the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at Saybrook University. This position is an integral part of the research process for all students working on a masters thesis or doctoral dissertation. As director of the IRB, she critically and thoroughly reviews all proposed projects for their impact on research participants. The IRB is also known as an ethical review board because it is responsible for protecting the rights and welfare of human subjects participating in research projects. These systems of rules and policies are mandated by the United States Office for Human Research Protections known as Title 45 - Code of Federal Regulation. This provision established as the National Research Act of 1974 allows for IRBs to perform the critical evaluations required to approve research that involves human participants (Office of Human Subjects Reserach, 2005).

Williams, as director, is responsible for insuring that all student and faculty proposed projects use the appropriate methods and protocols to maximize the safety of all human subjects that are enrolled in research studies.

The review board process is one of the many arduous and time consuming steps each student must go through before starting any research investigation. Williams spends the time and effort to help every student understand the details and importance of how the process works. She conducts seminars, as well as avails herself to individual discussions on how best to proceed with the application process. She gives a critical analysis to each application with helpful and appropriate feedback for modifications and corrections. She shows a thoughtful sensitivity to each student's proposal by helping to ensure the most educational value is implemented. She also provides positive feedback that helps to promote the student's continued passion and inspiration for the research inquiry. The efficiency and thoroughness of her skills is what continues to be a remarkable accomplishment. The faculty and students

have the assurance that she will always come through when deadlines must be met. This proficiency is a very valuable level of competency for all students working with her! And to boot, it should be noted that Williams accomplishes all of this usually within a 24 hour timeframe from the time an application is submitted for review to the IRB. And we are not kidding, readers, as this is literally unheard of in most universities! I (Fracasso) personally experienced this process with Williams recently. I turned my application into Williams and within 20 minutes I received a confirmation email from her stating she had received my application, and in less than 24 hours she had thoroughly reviewed my application with a request for a few revisions. I sent in my revisions that same day, and within an hour had an IRB approval for my proposed research. Again, absolutely incredible!

Dr. Williams' own history of education included completing her dissertation at the University of New Mexico, which focused on the cross cultural study of sex-role orientation. Her study was nominated for the Popejoy Prize of Excellence for best dissertation in a three year period. She is also a licensed psychologist in both the states of Hawaii and New Mexico. She is a member of numerous professional associations and has authored and edited several professional publications. Her work with students includes being the chair or member of over 240 students' dissertation committees. The clinical issues addressed in some of the students' explorations include relational and somatic psychology, consciousness studies, theory development, ethnographic and social research. The diversity of past students' topics also includes health and healing arts, creativity, criminal justice, and organizational behavior and development. Regardless of a students' primary field, Williams, encourages an interdisciplinary and genuine passion for the journey of inquiry because that is what enlivens the process of doctoral studies.

The intersections of creativity, wellness, and meditative studies are some of her many academic interests. Among her other areas of specializations, she includes systems theory, research building methods,

the study of myth and culture, and Buddhist psychology (Williams, 2008). After spending the past 26 years with graduate students, she says it is an honor and privilege to witness the growth of adult learners. She describes herself as a “midwife” watching students grow and expand their academic potentials. “I feel so lucky to have found this path of service... I have always thought that I must have the best job on the planet!” (Williams, personal communication, July 2011). The Board of Trustees at Union Institute in recognition of her many years of professional endeavors, recently named her Professor Emerita.

The research journey does not have to be an isolated experience. There are many knowns and unknowns as a student travels through this exploration. Dr. Williams is an excellent navigator for students who trek through this academic excursion. Thank you

Dr. Williams for all that you do. Thank you for your compassion, your “eagle-eye” in the IRB process, your quick response time, and mostly, for sincerely and authentically caring about the growth of your students.

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