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Introducing #ResearchMountain: A Metaphor for Mentoring Student Research

Sam Zizzi

West Virginia University

This paper introduces the concept of #ResearchMountain – a metaphor for conducting and mentoring research in sport, exercise, and performance psychology. First, the paper outlines the origins of #ResearchMountain, followed by a narrative description of specific #ResearchMountain locations corresponding with key steps of the scientific method. The locations of *Basecamp, Literature Forest, Preparing for the First Climb, Institutional Review Board Icefall, Ice Fields of Data Collection, Analysis Hill, Proposal Mountain & Defense Peak*, and *Dissemination Pass* are described in detail with instructional approaches to mentoring students in research projects. Benefits of using #ResearchMountain as a metaphorical approach are highlighted and narrative feedback from past student-climbers are shared

Keywords: narrative scholarship, #ResearchMountain, research mentoring

Welcome to #ResearchMountain. In the Twitter world, I am known as @DoctorSizzle and I will be your professional guide on this journey. It is my goal to help you understand the steps you, a novice #ResearchMountain climber, will need to take to successfully prepare and execute a rigorous research project. In this scholarly narrative, I will introduce you to #ResearchMountain, a metaphorical concept that presents a practical framework that both student "climbers" and mentor "guides" can use to navigate the mountain's challenging terrain. I am hoping this article offers a conceptual model that can be adapted for use outside of its original discipline – psychology of sport, exercise, and performance – for use in other domains. I am also hopeful that individual students, like you, can find meaning in #ResearchMountain as a metaphor to inspire your own research climb.

The Origins of #ResearchMountain

Around 2012, after a dozen years as university faculty, I noticed our students were struggling to make progress on their research alongside all other demands of an applied graduate program. Their teaching and consulting experiences were often exciting and novel, and the easiness of prioritizing their efforts in these domains over research was often justified because of the immediacy of both student and client needs, and the quick return on investment in applied experiences. In contrast, efforts in research were experienced as isolated and, at times, meaningless. I wanted to change the tone of these seemingly mundane and boring research experiences to joyful and epic. Quite a challenge, right?

As a student research mentor, or a guide on #ResearchMountain, I have always been practical in my approach. For example, balancing the quality of the research study, the student's skillset, and the intended timeline for graduation are all important considerations. I subscribe to the motto "a good research project is one that is finished and submitted for publication." I am also a visual person with a tendency for strategic thinking. I often found myself drawing out models to make sense of the variables students intend to study or creating tables and figures to make sense of results. As a researcher and an educator, I have always needed to see the big picture first, but I often find students getting stuck on the details. In my quest to entice students into putting the same effort into their research experiences as they did to teaching and consulting, I was searching for a metaphor and visual image to give us all the same "big picture." I also wanted this metaphor and image to provide a common path

CONTACT: Dr. Sam Zizzi, West Virginia University, College of Physical Activity and Sport Sciences, 375 Birch St., P.O. Box 6116, Morgantown, WV 26505, USA.
E-mail: szizzi@mail.wvu.edu

for my students to walk that would bring meaning and shared validation to the research experiences.

I soon sketched out a picture of a couple hills and mapped out various stages of the research process across the sketch. I liked the idea of "the climb" because doing research feels like hiking uphill much of the time. Also, we are all sport, exercise, and/or performance enthusiasts at our core, so the concept of moving and trekking up and around something seemed fitting, much like summiting is seen by some as symbolic of high performance and achievement. The fundamental stages of conducting research, including carrying out literature reviews, writing and defending a research proposal, collecting data, analyzing data, and preparing a manuscript for submission and presentation are nearly universal across different fields of study.

This draft visual found its way on a photo of the Himalayas in Nepal I had personally taken on a visit in 2014. Next, I created course materials (assignments and associated rubrics, lectures, and class activities) to guide students through each of the #ResearchMountain stages. Essentially, I mapped the scientific research process onto a photo of the highest mountains on Earth and used that as the backdrop for various courses and independent studies. What could be more epic than Mount Everest?! The culmination of this map allowed me to merge both my practical and philosophical approaches to guiding student research. I have been climbing #ResearchMountain up and down ever since.

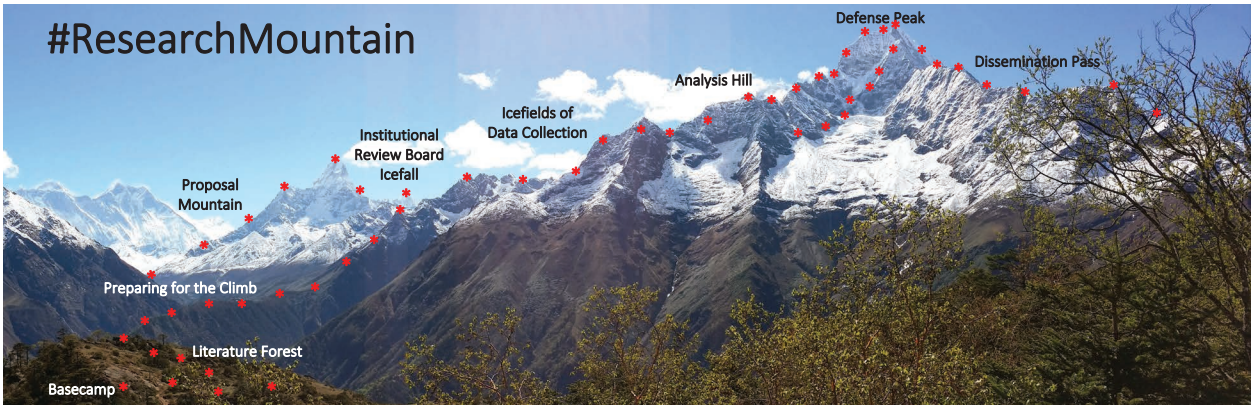
Getting to Basecamp: My Experience as a Mountain Guide

As a faculty member in one of the longest-running sport and exercise psychology (SEP) programs in the United States, I have been blessed with two decades of experience mentoring undergraduate and graduate students in their research. In addition to the undergraduate and graduate students I serve in sport and exercise psychology, I have also mentored students from athletic training, coaching education, physical education, and counseling psychology. My mentoring experiences to date include supervising numerous independent studies, teaching undergraduate research methods and graduate statistics to hundreds of students, serving on more than 60 graduate thesis or dissertation committees, and supervising more than two dozen of my own PhD students.

I have spent so much time on #ResearchMountain that eventually, I built myself a metaphorical cabin in a secluded section of woods overlooking a pristine mountain lake. I would invite aspiring student-climbers for a coffee or tea and to rest while they acclimated to the experience of climbing #ResearchMountain. Beautiful visions for future research projects have bubbled up in the space created in these mentoring moments. These shared philosophical and artistic experiences are some of the best parts of my job because of the challenge of the assignment (i.e., most students hate research methods and statistics) and because of the growth and insight I have witnessed in my students afterwards. Once students leave my cabin in the woods filled with caffeine and exciting new ideas, they often gather with their peers and process these conversations.

For me, creating a social climate where research is discussed and supported is a key component to a successful climb up #ResearchMountain. Talking research amongst peers can yield many positive benefits for both students and faculty (see Visek et al., 2020). Having a research culture with structure and support keeps students on track and can lead to greater satisfaction in graduate school (Tompkins et al., 2016). On one of

Figure 1. The Himalayas, Nepal; image taken in 2014.



my course evaluations, a graduate student comment affirmed the above by stating: "[#ResearchMountain] kept me accountable, the timeline and structure, and I think the feedback I received helped me become a clearer and more confident writer."

Locations on #ResearchMountain

When approaching #ResearchMountain for the first time, the good news is that there are trail markers all over, put there by former climbers. Signposts such as *be aware of large crevasses as you start to collect data, and attention – be kind to all Institutional Review Board (IRB) administrators*, to name a few, are firmly in place to alert new climbers. The paths along the mountain have been trampled by decades of dedicated researchers pursuing their own summit attempts. Another graduate student noted this benefit by sharing "Oh the joys of climbing #ResearchMountain… it was helpful in facilitating our learning process and providing a trail map of sorts." So, let's explore #ResearchMountain and its locations.

Basecamp

Before venturing out to search for relevant literature, gathering at Basecamp is an important step of the climb. It is where we, faculty and students together, make the necessary preparations for the climb up #ResearchMountain. The Basecamp metaphor makes a lot of sense to students, because planning and organization are necessary before any trip of significant length. At Basecamp, we discuss details of what needs to be accomplished (e.g., assignments, university requirements, committee structure, timeline) and how to approach the process of synthesizing literature, decoding results sections, and writing effectively in a clear voice. As part of the Basecamp preparation, students are required to pursue ethical training related to their research (e.g., protecting human research participants for social scientists). Depending on the research project and the level of student, Basecamp is a good moment to form intentional climbing groups if the planned research projects warrant a team approach. Basecamp orientation typically lasts for 1-2 weeks, just long enough for student climbers to be acclimated to the higher altitudes on #ResearchMountain. For independent studies and master's thesis projects with individual students, I recommend using Basecamp to clarify expectations and creating a basic contract for the work ahead. Having a contract helps students clearly see the specific work products and the timeline by which they are to be completed (e.g., produce a 12-15-page review of literature that integrates 20-30 quality sources by an agreed upon date), and clarifies expectations between the student and faculty.

Figure 2: Student climbers supporting each other on #ResearchMountain

At Basecamp, I often ask individual students or climbing groups to come up with a phrase that provides meaning to their upcoming climbing experience. These mottos can be useful for students when their motivation wanes, or when their efforts seem fruitless. I borrowed this strategy from my own very first intense research experience as a master's student. For our thesis research projects at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, my colleague Matt Martens and I were fixated on graduating on time. We carefully reviewed the campus calendar for the last date it was possible to defend a thesis and still graduate in May. That date was April 23rd. Yes, I still remember it and to this day, Matt and I celebrate it annually like a national holiday. Our motto was "April 23rd is the salvation." It may sound a little absurd or even religious, but that motto fit the moment, and we plastered that phrase all over our department and in our apartments. Matt and I were united in our efforts. We shared the suffering of each step up #ResearchMountain. There was great value in that first journey up that I still appreciate today. The motivation of shared suffering has been noted by my own graduate students in their evaluations, such as this comment by a former PhD student: "Knowing everyone was in the same boat made this feel less like a grind and more exciting." One of my particularly perfectionistic PhD students developed the motto of "Good + Done = Perfect" to get around her worries about each draft having to be just right and the procrastination that accompanied her pursuit to perfection. Another PhD student selected a motto of "Slow motion is better than no motion" to emphasize the incremental nature of a long trek. There are many others – each powerful and meaningful in their own way. What will yours be?

Literature Forest

One of my jobs as a research mentor is to free students from worries, guilt, and other barriers that

impede the thing they must do – which is to write. Now, let's get onto the writing. The Basecamp preparations lead the students to the "forest" of literature. The journey through the Literature Forest typically starts with leisurely walks together, stopping and looking at a small group of trees (i.e., data-based journal articles on a particular topic area) and discussing the anatomy of each one. With faculty support, students learn to search for the right area of the forest (i.e., specific topic areas of research in high quality journals) and to take detailed "field notes" on each tree they find along their way. While in the Literature Forest, faculty and student discussions are also focused on how to evaluate the quality of each study and how to integrate and compare sources. As the student-climbers gain skills, they are encouraged to camp out overnight in the forest or, if they are a PhD student, to consider building their own permanent cabin for longer stays. Students are encouraged to "get lost" and to expect to occasionally lose hope in the seemingly endless search for the right trees. As any seasoned researcher already knows, gaining expertise on a research topic by scouring the literature is a critical, laborious step that cannot be skipped. Build a hut, warm yourself by the fire, get comfortable - you are going to be there a while. Short day trips are not going to get you very far, and there are few shortcuts. "Read to write" are common words of encouragement I use with my students, as is "let the evidence speak." After a successful stay in the Literature Forest, students learn how to get out of their own way (i.e., remove their opinions), and write about the literature in a clear, parsimonious way. Well, at least that is the goal anyway. As a #ResearchMountain guide, I do my best to provide specific feedback on writing and to help students understand that it takes time and multiple drafts to produce quality writing. This lesson about the iterative nature of scientific writing is usually not well-received, especially among undergraduate students.

Figure 3: Lessons learned while climbing the #ResearchMountain

One particularly studious PhD student encapsulated his time in the Literature Forest by quoting author Robert Frost: *"These woods are lovely, dark and deep. But I have promises to keep, and miles to go before I sleep, and miles to go before I sleep"* (Frost, 2001). This quote embodies the feelings of fatigue and isolation that can occur when wandering in the Literature Forest. Students often emerge from this darkness flush with new ideas on how to write about the literature or how to evolve the literature by proposing a new, innovative study. Their detailed field notes eventually serve as the source material for an introduction that provides a rationale for their study, a set of research questions, and a complete methods section that can be taken to an IRB and/or research committee for additional feedback.

Preparing for the First Climb

After emerging from the Literature Forest, students will leave the sheltered canopy of knowledge and expose themselves to the elements on #ResearchMountain. Building a new research proposal as part of their first climb is a usually daunting experience. In this #ResearchMountain location, the students encounter barriers and resistance, and their motivation will be challenged. Doubts start to creep in. One graduate student affirmed the struggle: "well this journey has definitely been uncomfortable, but growth doesn't come from comfortable." I have found that by preparing students to expect a difficult climb, though initially intimidating, helps them to understand that quality work takes quality effort, and through this effortful growth, their journey takes on meaning.

I believe one way to express compassion towards students while climbing the #ResearchMountain is to hold them accountable for doing quality work, which involves critically synthesizing literature and writing in their own voice. These are difficult things to do well, and I emphasize the iterative nature of writing. I often use examples from other industries, to illustrate the value of drafts, and how not to be attached to the words you write. They are, after all, just written words. I remember listening to an interview with Eddie Vedder (lead singer of the band Pearl Jam) when he was asked about song writing and how he knew if he was any good at that. He told a story about meeting a famous painter, who said her approach was to paint 100 paintings and then decide if she was any good at it. This idea is truly incredible and liberating! I suggest to students to simply focus on doing their best each draft and then wait to judge their skills until they have written 100 research papers, or perhaps never at all. Just be free and write. Personally, after

nearly 100 published journal articles and book chapters, I am still figuring out if I am any good at writing myself.

Institutional Review Board Icefall

The next location on the #ResearchMountain is an important "safety checkpoint" with a goal to ensure the planned climb up is well thought out and safe for all involved. A student's research proposal usually gets formally evaluated by a research committee and/or the university's IRB. These groups, usually consisting of established faculty researchers, evaluate the student's proposal for its potential contributions to the literature. The evaluators also make sure the research meets institutional policy requirements for things like: (a) benefits and risks to participants, (b) informed consent, (c) data protection, and (d) adverse events. Most institutions have different levels and processes of review depending on the potential methodological risk and the population being studied. The review process can take as little as a day or two for low-risk research or it can take weeks for a longer, more invasive intervention research involving protected health information or vulnerable populations.

Ice Fields of Data Collection

Once the research has received committee and IRB approval, students are free to climb up #ResearchMountain and begin their planned data collection on the sample population. This approval is usually quite exciting, which is exactly why the ice fields are an appropriate #ResearchMountain metaphor for this stage of the research process. Most students are not experienced ice skaters, so unexpected slips and falls are commonly encountered. Slips and falls can also lead to delays or changes in climbing plans, no matter how well prepared in advance. Students will need to be resourceful and persistent in getting up again, to ensure data collection is completed. Many things can go wrong in a research project, but if the data are a mess, then the results, and the rest of the climb will be meaningless. The simple principle of data collection should be "garbage in, garbage out." This frightening imagery helps students have realistic expectations about the process and to be extra careful during their recruitment and data collection efforts. If the student has spent adequate time in Basecamp and the Literature Forest, and they are willing to be persistent in their recruiting efforts, this part of the #ResearchMountain climb can go quite well. In addition to getting feedback from the committee or other seasoned researchers, pilot research is critical to identifying where the crevasses are for each specific study. Extending the analogy, this preliminary work helps the student lay a ladder across one or two crevasses to prevent falls. Having these "ladders" in place prior to starting data collection can improve the reliability and validity of the data and ensure data collection goes as planned, and helps the student climb up #ResearchMountain.

Figure 4: Not all #ResearchMountain climbs are a breeze

Analysis Hill

For data heads like me, Analysis Hill is one of the most exciting phases of the #ResearchMountain climb. There are few academic tasks as joyful and anxiety-provoking as the first look at the dataset. One thing that is tricky about #ResearchMountain is that although the trails are all clearly marked, depending on the method and size of the study, the length of time it takes to make it from point to point can differ dramatically. For example, I used a survey design for my master's thesis. I remember a long weekend where I did all of my descriptive and inferential statistical analysis. That section of Analysis Hill was short but steep. For qualitative projects I have led or supervised, the path up the Analysis Hill is not as steep but rather like a set of never-ending switchbacks. At this point in the process, students need to execute the plan they have laid out in their methods, then decide how to visually display their results (e.g., creating tables and figures). As a research mentor, I spend a lot of time with students in this phase making sure they are interpreting their data correctly and guiding them to appropriate resources for displaying their results. Once the analysis is complete, I encourage students to "stop at the top" of the Analysis Hill and take in the view. This pause is important. Students just hiked up a big hill and the view is gorgeous! It is important to savor the view and see how far you have climbed! Equally, the pause serves as an opportunity to "reset" yourself, rest, and get ready for the next climb up #ResearchMountain. Most students need to catch their breath and clear their minds so they can get out of the intricate details of Analysis Hill and see the broader patterns of results and how the patterns fit

with existing literature, to be able to write an effective and meaningful discussion section. This process requires a shift in both thinking and writing. I have found that letting the results section sit for a few days, or weeks, always produces a better discussion section.

Proposal Mountain and Defense Peak

For graduate students engaging in research as part of their degree (and even for undergraduate seniors pursuing honors or other research projects), research is typically guided, and ultimately approved by, a committee of several faculty members. When preparing for the first climb, these committee members contribute their expertise and intellectual property by helping students find literature, create research questions, identify an approach to assessment, and build a method section. Some committee members may also assist with participant recruitment or data collection, and some are chosen because of their ability to assist with data analysis and interpretation. My experience has taught me that committees always make a student's project better if the attitude of the student is *"all feedback is friendly"* (attributed to my mentor Dr. Ed Etzel).

How to build an effective committee is a topic for another narrative scholarship, but students should know that pleasing academics can sometimes be quite challenging. There can also be much frustration when there are "too many guides on the mountain." Ideally, the committee will provide the student with multiple perspectives, which forces the student to assert their expertise into the project, and consequently build a strong rationale for the decision making that informed the research study.

After a few weeks or months together on #ResearchMountain, my goal is to have provided the students enough tools and wisdom so they can navigate their own climb up #ResearchMountain with autonomy and confidence. As their guide, I like to be out of sight so they can appreciate the view without me in the way. I mean, who wants a selfie from the summit with my bald head in the photo?! In all seriousness, as a research mentor, I aspire to give just enough guidance and support that the student feels as though the entire climb up #ResearchMountain was their own. I want them to own their successes and failures, both of which are equally important learning tools. Other mentors, however, may prefer a different relationship with students – there are many ways to effectively guide students up #ResearchMountain, and my approach is only one. For students, it is good to ask your mentor about their guiding style and to inquire about their expectations, including things like authorship for presentations and publications (see Pearl 2 of Arvinen-Barrow & Visek, 2020 for further reading).

Figure 5: Ascending the #ResearchMountain

Dissemination Pass

We have all heard the saying, *"If a tree falls in the forest, and no one is there to hear it, does it make a sound?"* Sticking with this metaphor as it relates to #ResearchMountain, I ask: *"If you write a master's thesis or dissertation and no one reads it, did you really do anything?"* The last stage of the scientific method – dissemination – is often skipped on the way to earning graduate degrees. Unfortunately, many students engage in research projects to improve their resume and curriculum vitae and not necessarily with a goal to contribute to the literature. This, in more ways than one, is a missed opportunity to advance the field of sport, exercise, and performance psychology or any other discipline for that matter.

One important aspect of mentoring student research is to ensure students gain awareness of the collective community of researchers, past and present, in their area of interest. As a mentor, I want my students to feel part of that community, connected, and engaged in the shared pursuit of knowledge that helps those who would benefit from the research the student conducted. Becoming part of the collective research community is one of the great unseen benefits of doing research. When students arrive at the top summit and take their selfies, it is ok to rest a bit and simply admire the views in silence. Then, students need to be reminded descending down #ResearchMountain involves passing through Dissemination Pass.

Additionally, there is a hidden ethical issue with dissemination that is important for mentors to share

with their students. Any data-based project involves a burden on participants. This burden could simply be the time participants have taken to fill out a survey, or it could be more intensive involvement like participating in an interview or an intervention. Even a "short and simple" involvement like survey participation has the potential for harm, particularly with participants experiencing myriad of mental health conditions like anxiety, depression, and trauma. Summiting #ResearchMountain is a lot of work, and if the students merely write up their research to satisfy the requirements for their degree program but never publicly present or publish their findings, what benefit has emerged for those who participated in the research, or for the field in general (see Jackevicius, 2017)? One way we have addressed this issue at West Virginia University, at the graduate level, is to require submission of at least one manuscript as first author prior to awarding either a master's or doctoral degree. This requirement could easily be integrated into other types of research projects as well.

Go Tell It from the Mountain: Student Testimonials about Research Mountain

So far, I have led dozens of graduate students and hundreds of undergraduate students on treks of various lengths up and around #ResearchMountain. Many undergraduate students in research methods courses wonder why they even need research. My PhD students on the other hand know they must make the #ResearchMountain climb to earn their degree. Regardless of the level of student, and the research focused course I teach, I have a standard item on my course evaluations that asks the students to describe their journey on #ResearchMountain and any lessons learned.

What have students said about their experience on #ResearchMountain? Well mostly, and unsurprisingly, they talk about their suffering and how challenging it is to do research well. They also talk about the value of that struggle and the meaning they find in shared suffering and new skills learned. One undergraduate student commented: "The journey was long and challenging. It was well worth the pain and suffering that took place completing this project."

The students also seemed to embrace their "failures" and the specific feedback they received throughout the #ResearchMountain climb. One student noted that "the analogies which correspond to the course set an enthusiastic tone throughout the semester" while another stated that "the journey on research mountain has been the most beneficial of my entire college career."

Tweet Your #ResearchMountain

With a goal to engage undergraduate students and facilitate a research-focused social climate outside of the classroom, I have had success in using social media. For me, Twitter has been the preferred medium to share student successes and to encourage students to share their failures and successes. You can check out some of the tweets by searching #researchmountain on Twitter.

Table 1. Memorable Student Feedback from their Journey on #ResearchMountain

Undergraduate Student Feedback	Graduate Student Feedback
"The analogies which corresponded to the course set an enthusiastic tone throughout the semester."	"It really kept me accountable [the timeline and structure] and I think the feedback I received helped me become a clearer and more confident writer."
"Brought knowledge of the entire curriculum together… much different than other courses, but I will say that I did enjoy research mountain."	"Well, this journey has definitely been uncomfortable but growth doesn't come from comfortable."
"The journey on research mountain has been the most beneficial of my entire college career."	"Oh, the joys of climbing research mountain…it was helpful in facilitating our learning process, and providing a trail map of sorts."
"The journey…was long and challenging. It was well worth the pain and suffering that took place completing this project."	"Knowing everyone was in the same boat made this feel less like a grind and more exciting."
"The metaphors relating to research mountain made the class more fun."	

To evaluate the impact of including social media as part of the #ResearchMountain experience, I created specific questions for my undergraduate capstone course student evaluations across several semesters. These questions asked students about the impact of using Twitter on their motivation to do research, their connection with me as a course instructor, and an open-ended question about their personal experiences on #ResearchMountain.

The results from the evaluation research on #ResearchMountain showed a moderate effect on class participation and engagement in many students in the class. Themes that emerged from the evaluation research included: (a) validation for student frustration with research, (b) hard work, and (c) appreciation for shared experiences with their peers. Some students also described how using social media increased their joy and enthusiasm for the research process! To quote one student: "the metaphors relating to research mountain made the class more fun."

Although using Twitter as a means of enhancing the #ResearchMountain experience, it worked better for groups of undergraduate students than individual graduate students. However, some PhD students fully embraced the #ResearchMountain metaphor by creating their own avatars for a physical image of the #ResearchMountain (see image above, Figure 1) in their graduate student offices. The shared office space was appropriately named "Basecamp", and the avatars were used to show current locations of each of the students on #ResearchMountain that made their progress (or lack thereof) available to their peers.

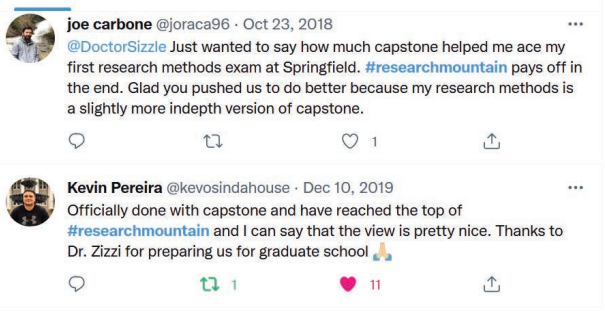
Final Words from Your Guide

In this paper, I have explored the realities and expectations of student research and why engaging students in research is worth doing. The framing of the research process as an epic climb on #ResearchMountain continues to resonate with many students. The concept I have created and presented here can be used as a framework for student research, both at the undergraduate and graduate levels. It can help faculty and students to: (a) shape initial expectations of what to expect from research, (b) identify specific steps necessary to succeed in research, and (c) appreciate the potential outcomes of that work. I have successfully used the #ResearchMountain metaphor in a range of undergraduate and graduate research projects including literature reviews, group-based empirical research projects, independent studies, and thesis and dissertation projects. Ultimately, the purpose of using the #ResearchMountain approach is to provide students both support and accountability to accomplish goals, earn degrees, and make a scientific contribution to the field.

All of us are indebted to past #ResearchMountain climbers who have built the knowledge base in our field. Their climbing efforts, and descents down through Dissemination Pass fills our textbooks and our classrooms. It is important students feel a part of this larger search for truth, as is helping them see the value of the skills they generate during the #ResearchMountain climbing process.

For the readers who are currently working on a research project, congratulations, you are already on #ResearchMountain! I hope you can identify with some of the metaphors and experiences described in this scholarly narrative and can find some inspiration for your own climb. For the readers who are mentoring students, please take and use anything here that you find useful. You will strengthen as a #ResearchMountain guide over time and find your own ways, not mine, to prepare for and approach the upcoming climb. The #ResearchMountain will remain long after we are gone. No one can claim ownership. I invite you all to join me, as spending time with students on #ResearchMountain is one of the best parts of my job. It is truly an honor to be trusted as a #ResearchMountain guide, and each year I continue to be humbled by the work ethic and passion of my students. Climb on.

Figure 6: Reaching a top of the #ResearchMountain



ORCID

Sam Zizzi

https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0063-6992

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