Career Transitions Series

aCRN anthropology

CAREER READINESS NETWORK

Storytelling with Numbers

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Today's webinar concludes the three ACRN Career Transition Series* webinars on mixed methods

*Slide decks can be found here by scrolling down to "Conferences and Workshops"

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Fluidmaster
- **Research Question:** What is the decision process buyers have when shopping for and repairing their toilets?
- **Business Question:** Why is Fluidmaster's flapper not selling as well as their competitor's flapper?

Mars' Catalyst Lab
- **Research Question**: What is the current experience of stakeholders to inform an ecosystem of pet health?
- **Business Question:** How can Mars stay competitive and on the cutting edge with their products and services?

US Department of State
- **Research Question:** What's it like for FS Officers & families to move abroad every 3 years—and how can it be better?
- **Business Question:** How can the DOS increase efficiency and lower costs of the PCS process?

USDA
- **Research Question:** How satisfied and trusting are producers in NRCS when applying for EQIP & how can it improve?
- **Business Question**: How can digital transformation & process optimization help maximize resources & improve services?

Why Quantitative Data Needs Storytelling

Numbers Alone Don't Inspire Action
Data without narrative is abstract. Storytelling makes findings relevant and urgent for decision-makers.

Context Prevents Misinterpretation
A narrative explains why the patterns exist, helping avoid misleading conclusions from raw correlations.

Stories Make Data Stick
Neuroscience shows people retain information better when it's embedded in a story, especially if it connects emotionally.

Methodology Framework and Best Practices

Anchor in a human lens
EMIC constructs (e.g., **Satisfaction**, **Trust**, plus clarity, timeliness, support, ease, efficiency)

Structure a clear story arc
Base → **Climb** → **Summit** → **Descent** (context → tension → mechanism → implications & actions)

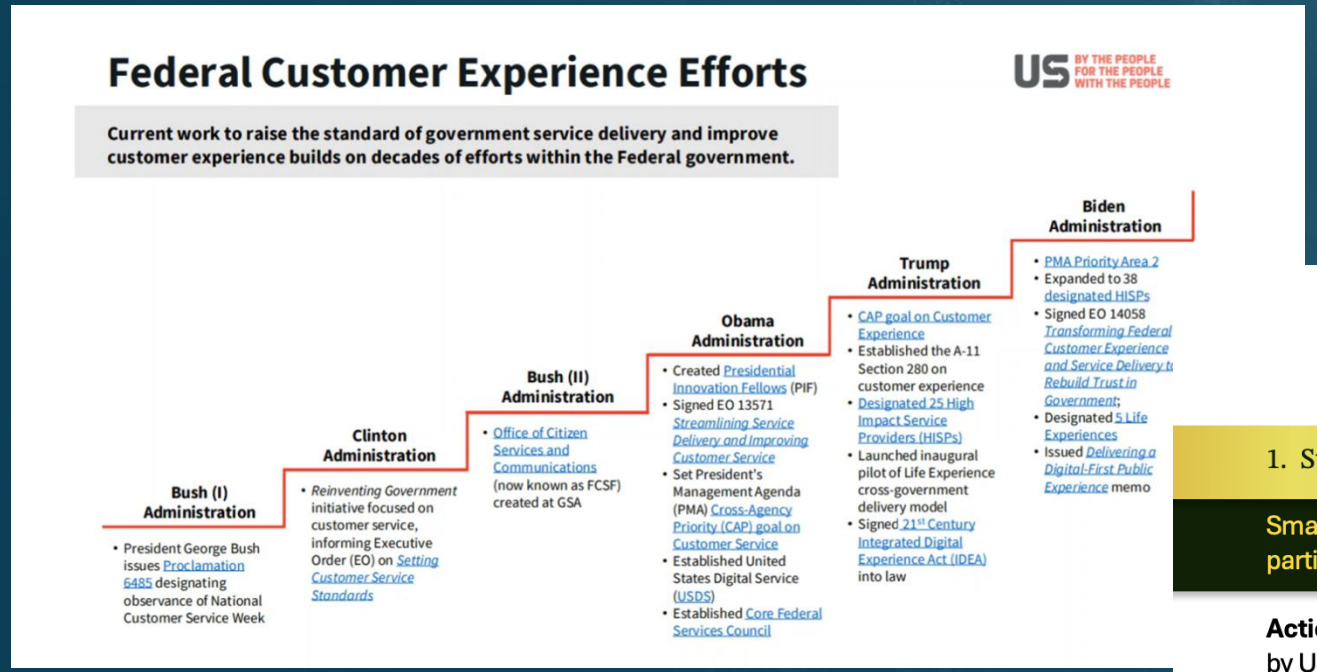
Balance precision & clarity
Keep rigorous methods visible; make the meaning digestible

Bind quant + qual
Numbers + open-ended responses (6,000+ replies) → "what" **and** "why"

Use theory → translate to design
Anthropological frames explain behavior → turn drivers (e.g., transparency) into checklists, status cues, plain-language touchpoints

NRCS EQIP Project: Why We Measured

EQIP is USDA's flagship voluntary conservation program that provides producers with funding and one-on-one technical support to design and implement conservation practices that improve farm operations and deliver environmental benefits beyond the farm.



CX Mandate

FARMERS FIRST

1. Streamlining & Digitizing USDA Application Processes

Small family farmers often have little to no support staff to fill out USDA required paperwork to participate in programs. The process is often complex and time consuming.

Action: Under President Trump, USDA is cutting red tape and streamlining delivery, as evidenced by USDA's rollout of the recent Emergency Commodity Assistance Program (ECAP), ECAP utilized pre-filled applications, was released ahead of schedule, and is paying farmers for economic losses within an average of three days of applications being filed. USDA is also launching an internal audit to identify every farmer-facing paper-based application that can be digitized and streamlined. Simplifying these processes for producers will reduce the barriers to entry for many programs while saving time and enhancing accuracy. Paper applications will remain available upon request for farmers who choose that option.

NRCS EQIP Program: What We Measured

EQIP Voice of the Customer Surveys

EQIP Application and Eligibility Survey

- First 10% of the EQIP journey
- Ongoing quarterly collection “waves” since FY2023 Q1
- 18,485 invitations and 4,847 valid responses

EQIP Customer Experience Survey

- Remaining 90% of the EQIP journey
- July 30, 2024 – September 10, 2024
- 138,000 direct invites and 19,480 valid responses

Denise's Story: Where the Pain Lives

ARC: Tension • Conflict • Problem

This is where the stakes are introduced, and the audience feels the friction or challenge.

TRUST – SATISFACTION GAP

Tension: “I don’t know where to start or who to call.” "The application process felt daunting"

The gate creates friction — trust is high but early satisfaction falls.

Insight: Fix the gate, not the journey.

Evidence:

- **Trust at entry: ~80%** agree/strongly agree
- **Satisfaction at entry: ~57%** agree/strongly agree
- **Forms “easy to complete”: ~60%** report easy → clear pain on key forms

Mechanism Action:
- simplify the gate — clearer rules,
- plain-language forms,
- visible status cues
- human fallback.

Tension: “I can’t tell where I am in the process or what’s next.”

Clarity converts anxiety into progress

What this feels like to Denise: Persistent uncertainty, repeated phone calls, and a fear she missed a step; she cannot plan time, finances, or farm tasks around an invisible process.

Evidence:

- **Transparency / clarity** is the **strongest statistical driver** of satisfaction (**r ≈ 0.53–0.54**)
- **Satisfaction later in journey: ~73%** agree/strongly agree
- **Key pattern:** When applicants understand expectations & status, satisfaction rises

Mechanism Action :

- **Show clear status & next steps** (dashboard + email/SMS cues)
- **Set expectations**: timelines, typical wait times, and SLA for staff responses
- **Single, plain-language checklist** for eligibility & required docs
- **Design a visible owner** (who to contact for each case) + human fallback

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Tension: “Application vanished into a black box.”

Make the system legible so producers can act.

What this feels like to Denise: Powerlessness and delay; she can’t see progress, can’t predict timing, and can’t course-correct—so confidence erodes.

Evidence :

- **~31%** of post-application respondents were **unfunded or unsure of outcome**.
- **≈30%** of open-ended comments flagged **lack of communication / transparency** (“never knowing where my application stands”).

Mechanism **Action: :**

- **Visible status:** dashboard + email/SMS progress cues.
- **Predictable timelines**
- **Named owner / escalation path:** who to call for this case.
- **Clear next steps + course-correction paths** so producers can act if something is missing.

Theory Support: Symbolic Interactionism • Forms as Cultural Signals

WHAT WE LEARNED:
Simplifying the Application Process Benefits Both First-Time and Returning Applicants.
Form ease correlates strongly with satisfaction (r ≈ 0.52). Simple forms → producers read the agency as more accessible.

WHY IT MATTERS:
Form complexity is **cultural**, not just technical. Dense paperwork signals gatekeeping and can alienate people used to oral, face-to-face knowledge transfer.
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DIVING DEEPER:
Symbolic interactionism: people interpret forms as symbols of how an institution sees them — welcoming or excluding.

DESIGN MOVES: (translate theory → product)
- Write plain-language prompts and short checklists.
- Pre-fill known fields from existing records.
- Show progress & status (progress bar + explicit next steps).
- Autosave + simple recovery to reduce fear of losing work.
- Named owner + escalation path — restore agency.
- Support channels that match local practices (phone, SMS, in-person options).

Theory Support: Social Capital: Trust Lives in Relationships

WHAT WE LEARNED:
Staff Helpfulness Is a Critical Satisfaction Driver for All Applicants but Especially First-Time Participants
Staff helpfulness is the single strongest satisfaction driver for first-time applicants (r ≈ 0.50).
For returning applicants, transparency/clarity is relatively stronger (r ≈ 0.53).

WHY IT MATTERS:
First impressions *stick*. Frontline staff are often interpreted as "the agency." Friendly, patient guidance builds trust and reduces future friction

DIVING DEEPER:
Applying is often a producer's first interaction with federal programs — not just a form fill. Complex forms + no human guide = discouragement, dropout, and negative word-of-mouth in communities.

DESIGN MOVES: (translate insight → practice)
- Keep humans in the loop: named contact for each case + escalation path.
- Peer mentors: farmer-to-farmer help or regional peer ambassadors.
- Response-time standards (SLAs): advertise expected reply windows so callers know what to expect.
- Digitize to augment, not replace: embed quick-staff callbacks, chat-to-human handoffs, and local-language support.

Theory Support: Clarity as Empowerment — Legibility = Power Shared

WHAT WE LEARNED

- Transparency (understanding what's asked) is the top predictor of satisfaction — r ≈ 0.54 for returners; r ≈ 0.53 overall.
- Staff helpfulness is also a strong driver (≈ r 0.48–0.50).
- Large mixed-methods sample: Application & Eligibility = 4,847; CX = 19,480; ~6,000 open-text responses.

WHY IT MATTERS

- Reduces anxiety & restores agency: clear status and expectations let producers plan time, money, and farm work.
- Protects long-term investments: EQIP is often part of multi-year planning; opacity threatens viability and trust.
- Prevents betrayal effect: returning producers expect predictability — ambiguity breeds perceived unfairness and community-level backlash.

DIVING DEEPER

- Power/knowledge lens: opacity centralizes power; legibility shares power — transparency is empowerment.

DESIGN MOVES: plain-language checklists, ranking summaries of missing items, progress/status cues (SMS + dashboard), named contact + SLA, pre-fill & autosave — these turn bureaucratic ritual into collaborative practice.

Arc of Resolution • Impact •Outcome

WHAT HAPPENED

Denise uses a phone-based pre-application checklist, submits digitally, and is contacted by a local NRCS staff member within a week. By the next season her drainage system is installed — the overwhelming process becomes **manageable, transparent, and tailored**.

Milestone Tracking & Alerts
Real-time status tracker + SMS/email alerts at key transitions.
Visible named contact for each file

Proactive Communication & Early Support
Quick human callback on high-impact cases; peer mentors for first-timers; published SLAs.
Outreach templates and preemptive guidance reduce confusion.

Form Usability (Plain Language + Pre-Fill)
Short plain-English prompts, pre-filled fields from records, progress bar + autosave.

IMPACT

Satisfaction recovers from **~57%** at gate to **~73%** after fixes.
Trust remains high (~**80%**) and now converts into action.
Fewer “where is my app?” calls, faster time-to-implementation, better planning for seasons.

Closing Chapters

WHY STORYTELLING + QUANT MATTERS

- **Connects scope to meaning:** Numbers tell *how many*; stories show *who* and *how it felt*.
- **Guards against misreadings:** Narrative supplies the context that prevents mistaking correlation for causation.
- **Drives action:** Leaders fund and change systems for people, not stats — a single story makes the case for resourcing.

NARRATIVE ARC

Cultural trust → Procedural struggle → Infrastructural negotiation → **Empowerment through transparency** → Community stewardship

ANTHROPOLOGICAL SIGNIFICANCE

Denise's arc shows how metrics (trust scores, satisfaction %, channel-use rates, correlations) are **cultural traces** — they map directly onto experiences of power, knowledge, and belonging. Design is the method by which we translate those traces into equitable practice.

Thank you
RADIANT

Anthropology Career Readiness Network

Mission: To prepare anthropology students and graduates for diverse careers through mentorship, skill building, and professional development.

Focus Area:

- Career readiness workshops
- Networking with Applied Anthropologists
- Resources to translate academic training into marketable skills

Vision: Anthropology recognized across all sectors for solving real-world problems.