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The Institute for Operations Research and the Management Sciences

Evan L. Porteus – MSOM Fellow Interview

MSOM Fellow, 2002

What is a good research topic, and how do I find it?

Topics that address issues that are of practical relevance but not adequately dealt with in the literature. I suggest that you avoid doing a big literature review before embarking on a research project.

My reasons:

1. If you do a big lit review, you will find yourself constrained to thinking in the way that the literature does. There may be certain assumptions and approaches that are essentially taken for granted in the literature and you may miss the opportunity to do something different if you end up constrained by the literature in your world view.
2. When you do get to making your big lit review, you will find it easy to do, because you have thought about the issues before. You will have a better appreciation for what people have done and why. And you may discover that you are the first to make a new, more realistic, assumption or take a new, productive, approach to the problem.

Any other comments or advice you would like to share with the OM Ph.D. students.

When writing a paper, to be consistent with your assumptions about how much background a reader might have, pick a specific person you know who has the amount of background that your ideal reader would have and write as if you are writing just for that person. You can use your knowledge about what that person knows and how that person thinks to determine how extensive your explanations should be and what they should emphasize. Do not write for yourself.