

Feeling Like a Third Wheel? Leveraging Faculty-Student-Librarian Relationships for Student Success

Methodology
A variety of ethnographic research methods were used to gather data in these two research projects, as show in this diagram.

Research Sites

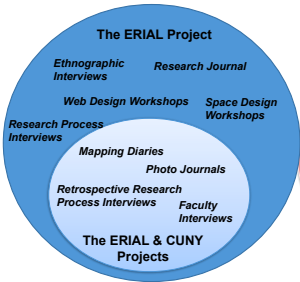
Ethnographic Research in Illinois Academic Libraries Project
<http://www.erialproject.org>

- DePaul University
- Illinois Wesleyan University
- Northeastern Illinois University
- University of Illinois at Chicago
- University of Illinois at Springfield
- Public and private, urban and suburban, residential and commuter
- Undergraduate enrollment: 2,000-26,000
- Interviewed 49 librarians, 75 faculty, and 156 students
- Over 600 total participants

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Undergraduate Scholarly Habits Ethnography Project
<http://lushep.commons.gc.cuny.edu>

City University of New York:
 • 3 four-year colleges
 • 1 comprehensive college
 • 2 two-year colleges

• Public, urban, commuter
 • Undergraduate enrollment: 7,000-21,000
 • Interviewed 43 faculty and 137 students

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Relationship Weaknesses Identified → Strategies to Strengthen Relationships

Faculty act as gatekeepers to the student-librarian relationship

- Students are more likely to utilize librarians when directed by faculty.
- Faculty don't know how librarians can help students or what services the library offers.
- Faculty see librarians as generalists and not as subject-area experts or research collaborators.
- Librarians are often frustrated by their under-utilization and faculty members' lack of appropriate expectations.

"I don't expect the librarians to know who is a good scholar... or an important article... Maybe I've a very impoverished notion of what librarians do."
- Faculty member

Connecting through library instruction

- Increased emphasis on library liaison and embedded librarian programs.
- Individualized research appointments.
- Target new faculty orientation.
- Workshops on developing model assignments that incorporate information literacy.
- Librarians can be more active in university community (attending workshops, serving on committees, etc.).

"I've never had expectations of librarians. I know they have the reference desk but I just don't have the expectation [that librarians will help students with research] because I just don't think the students use the librarians."
- Faculty member

Connecting through assignment design

- Students don't know how to find appropriate information sources; faculty bemoan lazy research and plagiarism.
- Librarians rarely participate in assignment design yet often act as interpreters to help students understand their assignments and explain what professors are looking for.
- Students have difficulty getting started on a research project and choosing a topic (procrastination, intimidation, lack of confidence).

"You couldn't procrastinate on it... because they were just separate assignments so it made it much easier to do"
- Student describing a scaffolded assignment

- Increase outreach to faculty, build partnerships and co-host workshops with centers for teaching excellence, writing centers, and WAC efforts.
- Align library research instruction to the language of the classroom (literature reviews, audience); make the library the go-to place for primary source research.
- Librarians can encourage assignment scaffolding or multiple due dates, and advocate to build a trip to the library into these structures; e.g. tutoring center model in which a librarian signs off on a meeting with students for research assistance.

Connecting through library instruction

- Students often have little prior experience with research—faculty may be frustrated by or unaware of students' low levels of information literacy.
- Faculty may not know that research and information literacy instruction is available to support them and their students.
- Institutions may not have a coordinated plan to ensure that students graduate with information literacy competencies.

"In terms of prior knowledge in research there is very very little. I'm always over estimating it."
- Faculty member

- Librarians can place more instructional emphasis on all types of information sources rather than merely library sources, e.g., discussion of Wikipedia in library classes.
- Outreach to faculty can focus on disciplinary goals to make library instruction more relevant, e.g., teach the structure of the literature review, not just finding articles.
- Integrated strategies can address information literacy shortfalls, e.g., student assessment, including an information literacy in college orientation course.

"Sometimes it feels repetitive, but then sometimes I forget over the semester, like, what's available."
- Student discussing course-integrated library instruction

Connecting at the reference desk

- Students often do not ask librarians for help at the reference desk because they do not know what librarians do.
- Students cannot necessarily identify which individuals working in the library are librarians.
- Our commuter students may not even go into the library building.

"Any particular reason why you haven't asked a librarian for help at any point [in college]?" - Anthropologist

- Librarians can hold office hours in academic departments, and wear badges to be more identifiable.
- An online student orientation can be adjusted to require a stop at the reference desk so that students can be welcomed by a librarian.
- IWU ended staffing at the reference desk (not due to ERIAL research, but the decision was supported by it), and has revamped student training to address problems identified by ERIAL.

"[I]to be honest with you, I didn't understand how they could help me... I've been so used to going at it alone..."
- College junior

Conclusions
Our ethnographic research provided a diverse set of findings, of which only a sampling is provided here, yet we found many common weaknesses. These include a lack of relationships between librarians and faculty, who largely shape the student research process, and a lack of relationships between students and librarians. We found that the relationship between student, faculty, and librarian that we had imagined to support the research process was not always in place; instead research was at times supported by a relationship between students and faculty only. Exploration of these difficulties resulted in a stronger grasp of how exactly they occur and what consequences they entail, as well as provided opportunities for librarians to consider how to leverage these relationships and improve the student research process.