How CUNY Students Create and Negotiate Learning Spaces
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We are library faculty who undertook a study of the academic culture of undergraduates at CUNY. Our study, the Undergraduate Scholarly Habits Ethnography Project, seeks to understand:

- Where are students doing their academic work?
- Why do they choose those places? How do they make them work?
- What tools do they use or need?

We're especially interested in what students are doing when we *can't* see them – we see them in the classroom, the library, and on campus, but what is it like for them as they do their academic work in other spaces?

We interviewed students and faculty at six CUNY colleges: Borough of Manhattan Community College, Bronx Community College, Brooklyn College, City College, Hunter College, and New York City College of Technology, using several different qualitative methods:

- 30 student interviews at each college:

    o Photo Surveys, in which we asked students to photograph 20 locations or objects related to their academic work, and interviewed them to discuss the photos

    o Mapping Diaries, in which we asked students to record and draw their movement and activities on a typical school day, and interviewed them to discuss

    o Retrospective Research Process Interviews, in which we asked students to describe and draw the process of working on a research assignment from inception to completion

- 10 semi-structured interviews with faculty at each college, to discuss faculty expectations for (and the realities of) student work in their courses

(More detailed information about our research protocols is available on our website: http://ushep.commons.gc.cuny.edu)

With so many interviews, we have a lot of data. Here are a few examples of students' photos and drawings from each type of interview. We're working on a book and a website to visualize the data from our project, photos and drawings as well as maps and timelines.

Today we're going to discuss students' academic use of spaces on and off campus, and how students are enabled and constrained by them.

What are students' experiences on campus?

The students that we spoke with on the CUNY campuses with lots of outdoor space and a traditional quadrangle – Brooklyn, City, and Bronx CC – all very much appreciated their

campus. In fact, we first noticed this when we did our initial pilot study at Brooklyn and City Tech, and ended up changing our final field site from Queens College to Hunter in order to add a dense campus to our study. Students especially noted the inspiration they felt while walking through the green and architecturally pleasant parts of the campus: at Brooklyn, they mentioned the iconic clocktower on the library building; at City, they mentioned the Gothic Shepard Hall; and at Bronx CC students raved about the Hall of Fame of Great Americans. On each campus it was clear that the traditional, quadrangle setting enhanced students' college experience.

In contrast, students at the three campuses which are more dense and urban – Hunter, City Tech, BMCC – often found navigating their campuses to be stressful and frustrating. While there are areas available for students to congregate on these campuses, they are very crowded during peak class times, and none of the three campuses has much (if any) outdoor or green space. Students at these campuses described alternative strategies for finding space to relax or study. Some sought out little-used spaces, like a City Tech student who shared that he sometimes studied on the top floor in a stairwell of one of the main campus buildings. Others sought out nearby neighborhood spaces within a few blocks of the campus: at Hunter, students visited Central Park; at City Tech, students hung out in the nearby Metrotech courtyard or walked down to DUMBO and the river; at BMCC, students walked along the pathways at the riverfront.

The students we interviewed also had lots to say about their campus computer labs. Every student we met used them to some degree, and they were especially appreciated for the free printing – even students with a printer at home would print their assignments on campus. Some students needed specialized software for the coursework in their majors, and had to use computer labs on campus to access it.

We heard lots of frustration about campus computer labs from students at every campus except Brooklyn (this photo and quote are from BMCC). Students complained about crowded conditions in the labs – especially at City Tech, BMCC, and Bronx CC – and were often stymied by the need to print an assignment quickly before class and the lack of available or functional computers and printers to do so. They were also frustrated by the presence of other students in the computer labs who were not doing academic work when they themselves needed to work on an assignment, though most told us that they would not ask a fellow student to cede their computer.

As library faculty we're especially interested in students' experiences in the college library.

Most of the students we spoke with preferred to study in the library over any other location on campus or off. They have internalized the institutional expectation of the library as a place for academic work, and spoke about their appreciation for the books, the quiet, and the serious atmosphere of the library. Many appreciated studying at the carrel desks for privacy, which was something they often lack in other locations, though some preferred to spread out while studying at a table. All sought out good lighting, especially natural light, and most wanted quiet while studying. Interestingly, we did not hear as much about group study from students as we'd expected.

But while some students were able to successfully do their academic work in the college library, others were not. These students complained most fervently about excessive noise in

the library, and a lack of institutional support of noise policies. Other students complained about their fellow students eating, and the library being dirty, though these were lesser complaints. At the physically smaller libraries in our study – City Tech, BMCC, and Bronx CC – crowding was a common complaint.

Some students found it so challenging to study in their own college library that they went beyond the main college library. Some studied at other CUNY libraries, often for proximity (a few students lived closer to Lehman and CSI), but also for the atmosphere. Baruch was the CUNY college most often selected as an alternative library for studying by the students we interviewed, a few of whom noted with appreciation its serious atmosphere. Other students used the public libraries in their neighborhood for both study space and other resources (e.g. books); our students are often familiar with public libraries from their use during high school.

For those students who wouldn't or couldn't do their academic work at the library, the most common location for their academic work was home.

Students who preferred to study at home cited comfort as their main reason. They appreciated the soft seating available at home, including sofas and chairs but also their beds (though some noted that the bed is not always the most conducive space for attentive studying). Home studiers also liked their access to food and drink while studying; none of the six libraries allow food in the library. Students also mentioned the ability to customize their surroundings with all of the academic supplies they need as one of the benefits of doing their academic work at home.

However, engaging in academic work at home was not without its challenges. Shared space was the biggest challenge: most students lived with multiple family members or others (a few had roommates), and many shared bedrooms. The supplies needed for academic work, for example, a computer, were also often shared with multiple other people in the household. It could be tricky for students to focus on their assignments with the activities of the other members of the household all around them.

Students were also sometimes limited by access to appropriate furniture: some of the students we spoke with didn't have a desk or bookshelf for their academic work and supplies. In households with shared computers and tables/desks, these were often located in areas of the home that weren't conducive to quiet academic work: in the living room next to the TV and videogames, for example. And as mentioned previously, most of the students we spoke with did not have printers, though even those who did would print on campus because of the cost.

CUNY is a commuter university, and most undergraduates commute between 45-60 minutes to campus each way multiple days per week.

Almost all of the students that we spoke with were interested in recouping their commute time to use for their academic work, which is one potential advantage of the availability of public transportation in NYC. Many students tried to do their course reading during the commute, and one described using his Kindle to do so. Some students worked on writing assignments on their smartphones, which we found very surprising; faculty confirmed that they sometimes received essays via email with the "sent from my phone" signature.

However, the commute via subway or bus is not the ideal location for academic work, and students faced many challenges in their use of the commute as a workspace. Specific features of each student's commute influenced her ability to work: crowding on the bus or train, whether she could get a seat (or had to stand), whether she needed to switch trains or buses (sometimes more than once). Students are on campus all day so they usually had lots of stuff to carry, and thus even students who owned laptops tended not to bring them to campus because they're too heavy, which influences the spaces they use on campus. Most students we spoke with struggled, at least sometimes, with getting academic work done on the commute, with their desire to use the time wisely and the reality of the commuting environment.

Ultimately we found that our students are logistics specialists. They spend lots of time strategizing how to make the most of the time they have: figuring out the optimal commute for the time of day, where to print their assignments, when the library was least crowded, etc. How can we help mitigate these challenges that students face, and free up time for them to focus on their academic work, not logistics?

While we understand that they may not be possible on every campus, there are many possibilities for revisions to pedagogies, programs, and facilities. On the high-budget end, colleges may expand or renovate campus and library spaces, as with the beautiful new library at Bronx CC. Additional computers might be added – or computer kiosks, print stations, or device loans – plus widely-available and reliable wifi, to provide access to technology when students need it. On the lower-budget end, colleges can maintain quiet and academic spaces in libraries and computer labs, and make the most of campus spaces that exist, for example, look to provide access to roofs, courtyards, and other spots.

Finally, we'd like to close with the importance of reflection. The students we met told us that they valued the opportunity to reflect on their academic work and their school days, and to consider strategies they might use that are more conducive to academic work. Providing opportunities for reflection is a low-tech, quick way for students to learn more about how they can better create and negotiate learning spaces to ensure their success in college.

Thank you!