

**“I like being under those rules here”
Students Using the College Library**

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Reinventing Libraries, Reinventing Assessment
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Undergraduate Scholarly Habits Ethnography Project

- 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 are library faculty at CUNY engaged in a qualitative research project about the student experience; here are our research questions. Qualitative methods can offer insights that challenge our assumptions about students. We are especially interested in what students are doing when we can't see them, and what's keeping away the students who aren't in the library.

The Study



30 student interviews at each college:

- Photo Surveys
- Mapping Diaries
- Retrospective Research Process Interviews

10 semi-structured interviews with faculty
at each college

We interviewed 30 students and 10 faculty members at 6 colleges in CUNY: Borough of Manhattan Community College, Bronx Community College, New York City College of Technology (which offers Associates and Baccalaureate degrees), Brooklyn College, City College, and Hunter College (which offer Baccalaureate degrees).

Our full interview protocols are on our website: <http://ushep.commons.gc.cuny.edu>

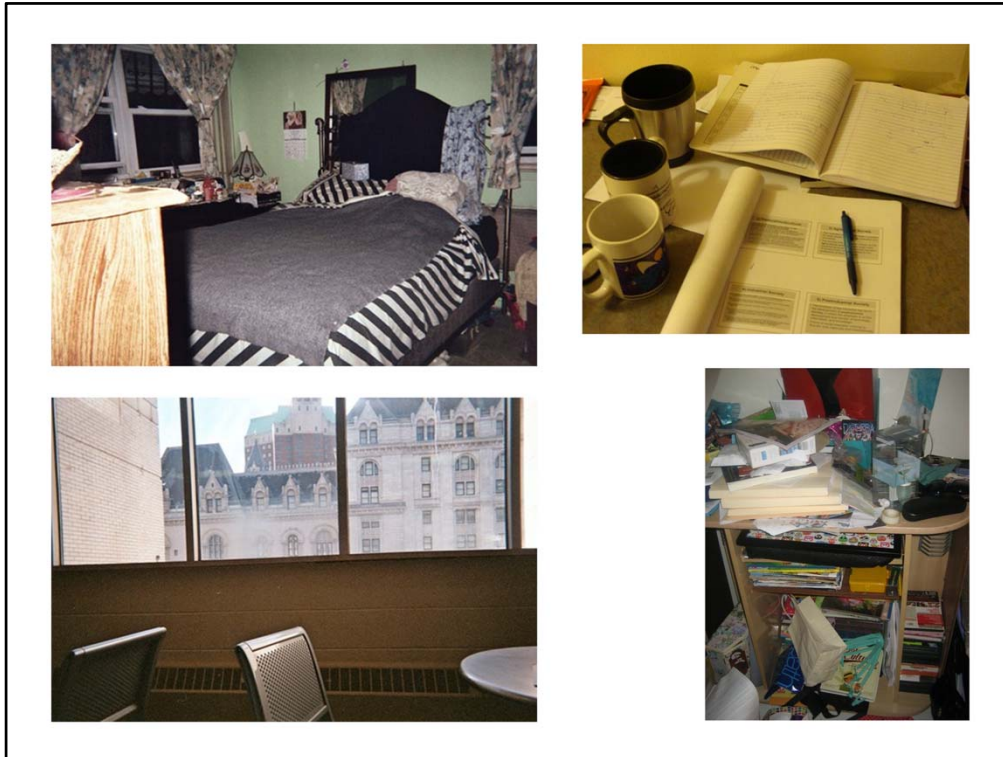
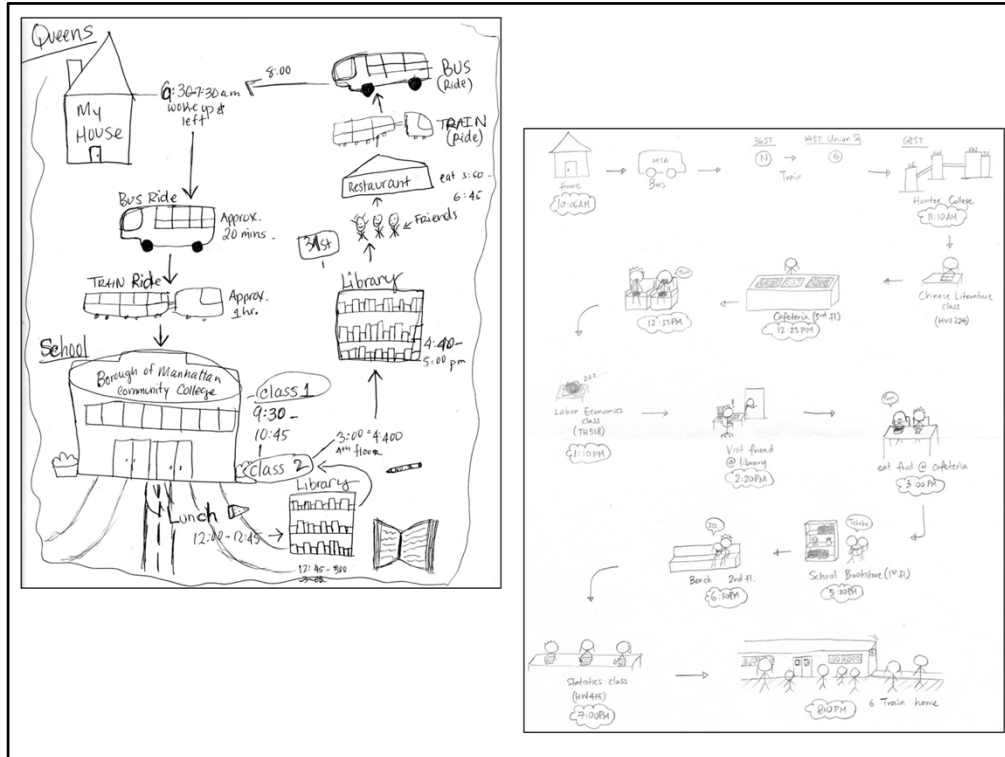
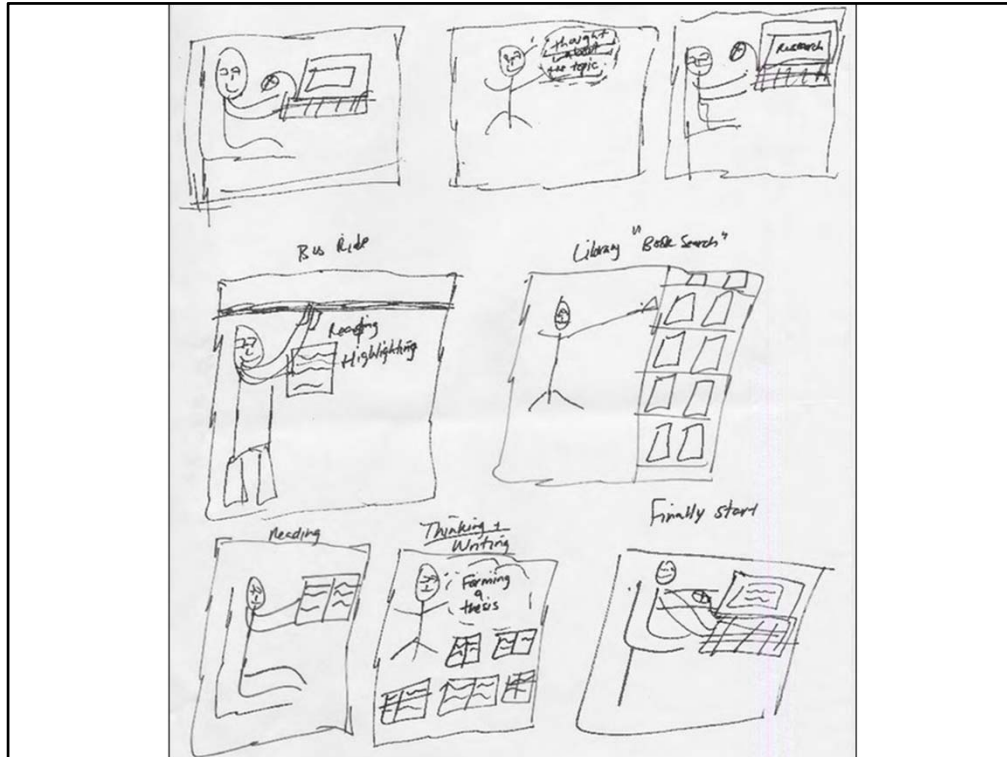


Photo Surveys: Ten students at each college were given a list of 20 objects and locations related to student scholarly habits to photograph, then interviewed individually and asked to explain the content of the pictures and offer comments. These photos are in response to the prompts (clockwise from top left): “your favorite place to study” (a student’s grandmother’s bed), “the night before a big assignment is due,” “the place you keep your books and school materials,” “a place at school you like” (this is at City Tech).



Mapping Diaries: Ten students at each college were asked to record and sketch their activities, including location and time, over the course of a typical school day, then interviewed individually to explain and comment on the maps and sketches.

The map on the left was drawn by a student at BMCC, and on the right a student at Hunter. Note in particular the length of these students' commutes – over an hour each way. Also note the students' honesty with us during this research: the Hunter student drew a picture of herself sleeping during a class.



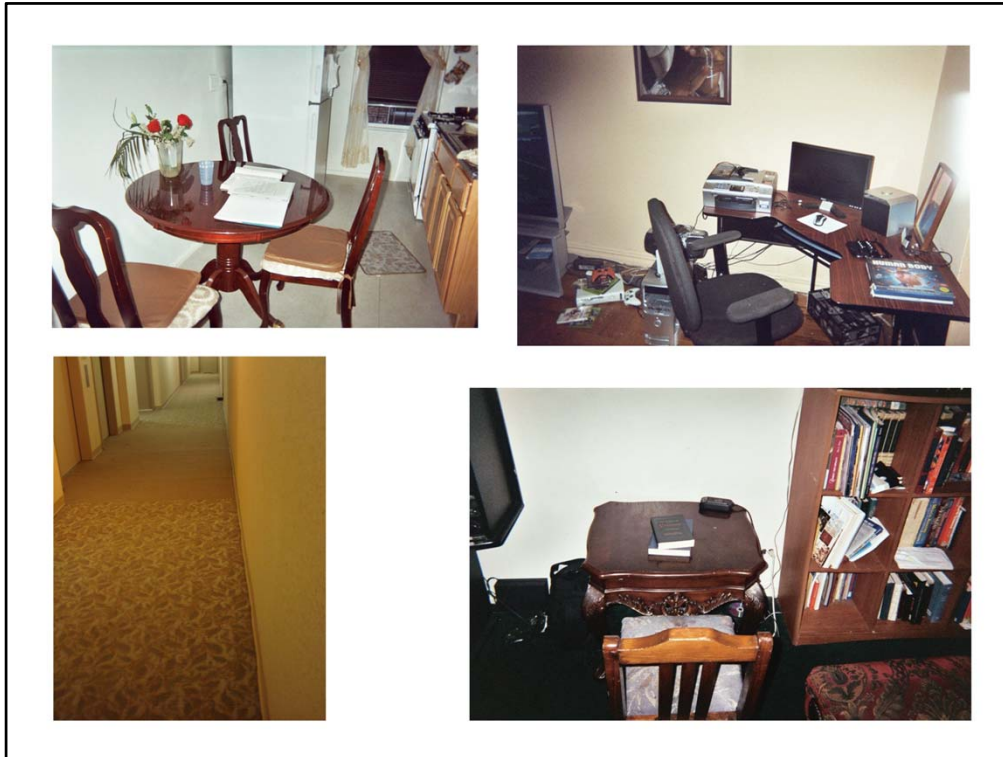
Research Process Interview: Ten students at each college were interviewed individually and asked to describe in detail how he or she completed a research assignment from start to finish, and to draw or sketch the process while describing it.

This student from Bronx CC describes all of the steps he goes through to think about his research project, do some initial research and brainstorming writing, and doing additional research in the library before finally beginning to write the paper.

Student Workspaces at Home

We want to very briefly mention students' experiences with their academic work at home. CUNY is an overwhelmingly commuter university, and most of our students live with their families or roommates.

Home for most of our CUNY students may not be ideal for academic work. The lived experiences of shared spaces, shared technologies, noise, distractions, or lack of academic technologies (e.g. printers) can be a real constraint for CUNY students, and likely for other commuter students as well. It's important to note, though, that the very high population density in New York City also has an effect on student workspaces.



(clockwise from top left)

Many students report that they don't have a desk or private space for schoolwork. Some students work at the kitchen table, sometimes with other members of their families who are in school. This Bronx CC student took a photo of the desk that he shares with the other two family members he lives with, and told us that the desk is in the living room which is also where he sleeps. The Brooklyn College student who took this photo works on a small table in the family living room, and you can see the TV just to the left of his desk. This hallway photo was taken by a Bronx CC student who has young siblings; she told us that when they were running around and making noise she sits in the hall to study, and that her neighbors complement her good study habits when they see her in the hall.

While there are not many studies which have examined students engaging in academic work at home, the Library Study at Fresno State published a few years ago did visit students in their homes. These students typically mentioned spaces like dens, offices, and garages that they could use for their academic work, in contrast to the CUNY students we spoke with.

Academic Work in the Library

Our study generated a lot of data. Today we're just going to talk about what we learned about the library (we're currently working on a book manuscript). We'll also talk a bit about student computing on campus, though we recognize that student computer labs are often a responsibility shared between libraries and campus IT more generally.



“It’s like an island in the middle of the sea of bookshelves. [...] It’s very easy to not come across it so it’s usually quiet. That’s why I like it.”

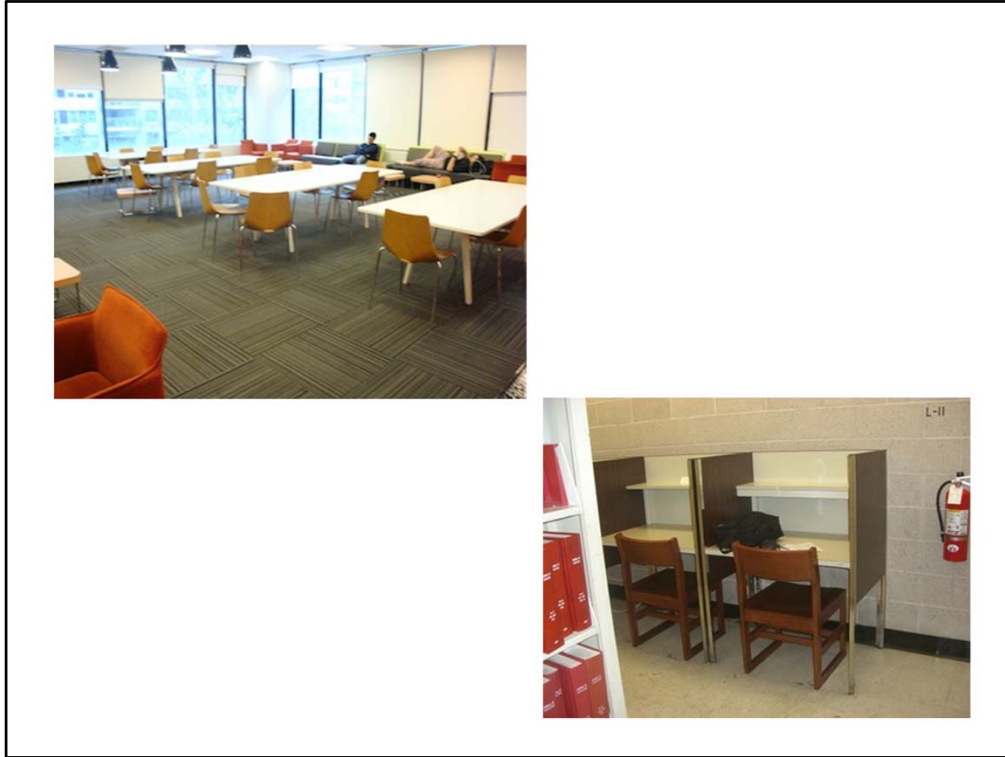
Students know that the library is serious, and most of the students that we interviewed wanted to do their schoolwork in the library. They have internalized both the cultural and institutional expectation of the library as a place for academic work, as well as the practical usefulness of the library as a place for their academic work.

“I have, like, some privacy which is, uh, a thing lacking at... So, I have some kinda privacy when I study.”



Many students talked about and photographed the humble, traditional carrel desk. They told us that they highly valued the privacy that carrels afford, and the opportunity to shut out distractions and focus on schoolwork. Some students did prefer to use tables in order to spread out their work supplies, but many truly appreciated the carrels.

Since many faculty assign group work and many academic libraries provide group study rooms or other group workspaces, we were surprised that we did not hear much from students about group study rooms or using tables for working in groups.



Students sought spaces with lots of light, natural light if at all possible, in contrast to the institutional fluorescent lighting in many libraries. Quiet was also very important to many of the students we spoke with, especially in contrast to the environment at home.

Some students relished finding out of the way locations or using little-known branch libraries, and described them to us as well-kept secrets. However, only the physically larger campuses and libraries that we visited afford that opportunity for students.



“If I find it too heavy I don’t [bring my] laptop, I borrow one from the library.”

Like other studies have shown (e.g. research at the University of Rochester), even students who own laptops often don’t bring them to campus, especially if their commute is long and they are required to bring textbooks and other heavy items with them to campus. Some of the libraries we visited offered laptop loans for students, and several students spoke appreciatively about those services.

Library Study Frustrations

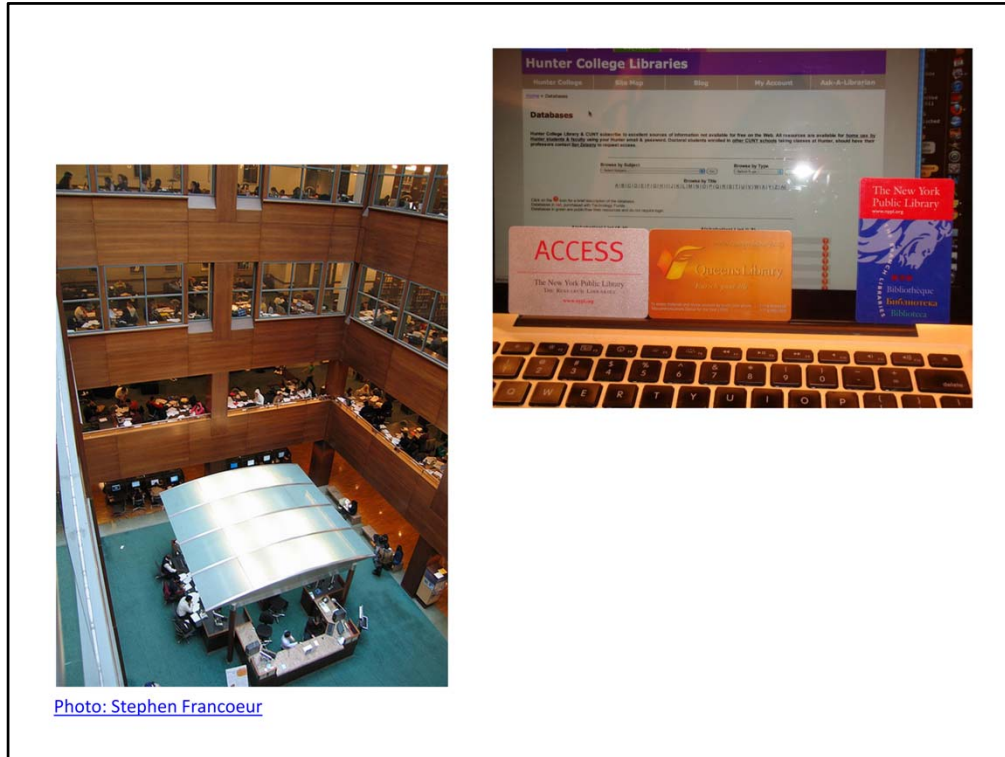
However, we also heard from students who were not successful in doing their academic work at the library. Their reasons for dissatisfaction varied.



Some students were troubled by environmental factors like noise and lack of cleanliness.

Some were frustrated when the rules of the library were not adhered to or enforced, for example, when things got loud, or fellow students were eating (none of these libraries permit food). The photo on the left is at BMCC (though the other libraries also have a similar space), and is a group of tables near the library entrance that we heard were always full of students talking and socializing. The photo on the right is a study room at City College, where students complained about graffiti.

For many of the students the core of their frustration seemed to be that their fellow students were using the library – an academic space – for non-academic, leisure purposes, and that the library staff did not insist that students follow the rules. When we asked them, students universally were hesitant to ask their fellow students to quiet down or stop eating, preferring that library staff do so.



[Photo: Stephen Francoeur](#)

Some students went to other libraries to overcome the difficulties they encountered when studying in their own college library. Of the CUNY colleges Baruch's library was most often mentioned as a preferred study space – students noted its serious atmosphere – but a few students mentioned studying at Lehman College and College of Staten Island. Two students told us they study at one of the private universities in the city: one at Columbia, and one at NYU-Poly; they preferred the extended hours and amenities at those libraries. And lots of the students we spoke with used the public libraries, mostly for their convenience to their homes and familiarity from using those libraries during their K-12 education.

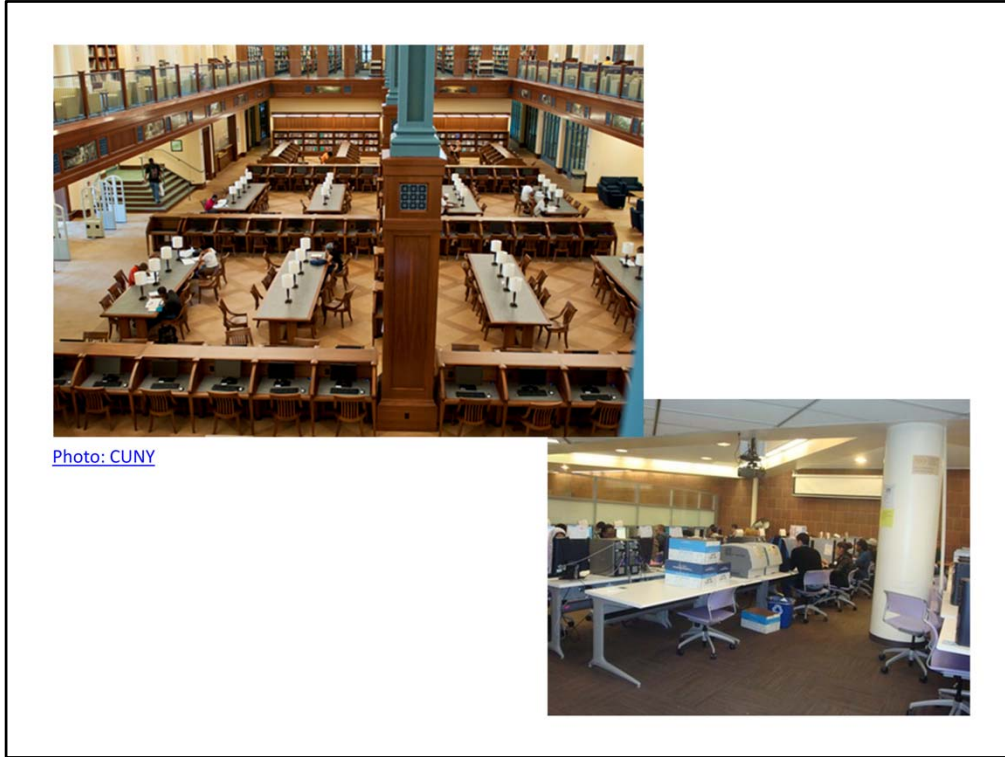
“It says it’s a Learning Resource Center but in actuality it’s a Hang Out With Your Friends and Look at Your Cousin’s Wedding Pictures Center . . . on Facebook.”



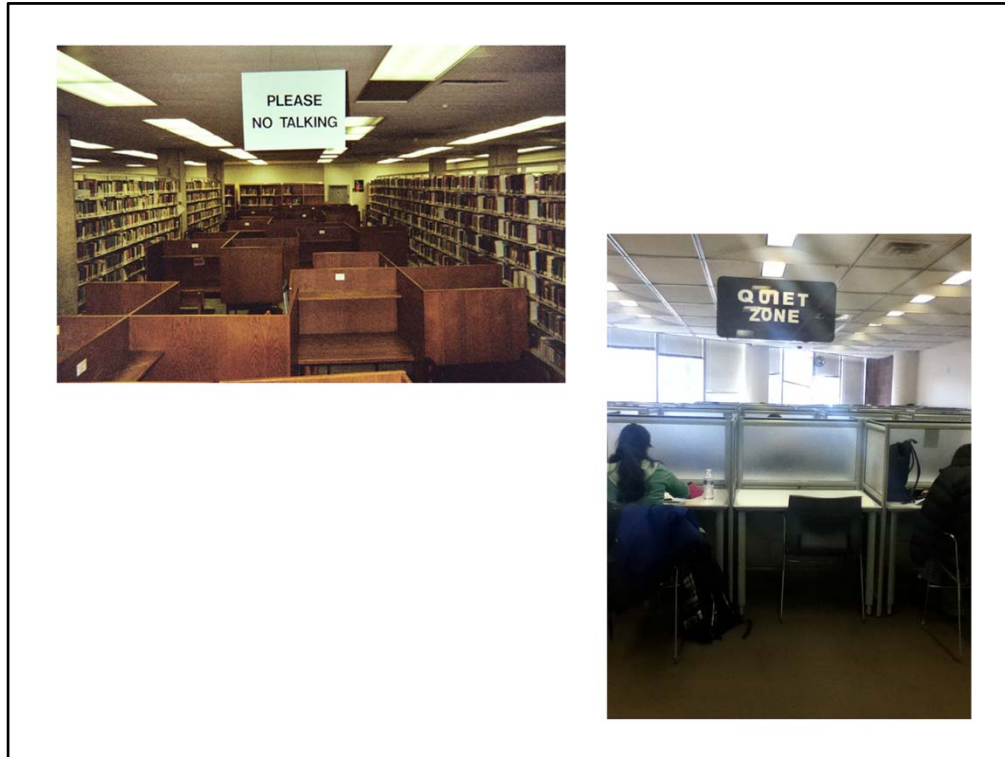
Students were also often frustrated by computer access in our libraries (and on campus more generally). Printing was a frequently-mentioned pain point: students often arranged their days around when and where they could access a printer to print an assignment on campus (all 6 colleges have at least some free printing for students). Students also complained about lines for computers, especially when fellow students were using the computers for non-academic reasons. A perceived shortage of computers was mentioned more often by students at the colleges with libraries and campuses that are physically smaller and space-constrained: BMCC, Bronx CC, and City Tech.

What can we do?

During our research we learned a lot about the challenges students face in using the college library for academic work. How can we help mitigate those challenges?



When budgetary resources are available we should consider possibilities for pedagogies, programs, and facilities that might include renovated campus and library spaces, more computers and/or laptop or other technology loans, or dedicated print stations for students. The photo on the left is the newly-built library at Bronx CC, which is a vast improvement over the old library space. The photo on the right is a print station at BMCC; Brooklyn College has also installed dedicated print stations which are heavily used by students.



But even without a big budget, there are small, low- or no-cost changes we can make to ensure that students can work successfully in the library. While they may seem dated, we should keep the carrel desks (or invest in new ones) to provide students with a private space of their own. Library staff can work with campus security, student government, and others to encourage students to maintain a quiet and clean environment in the library, and to enforce noise and food rules. Library staff can also work with campus IT to mitigate computer difficulties, ensure access to campus wifi, etc. And it's worth trying to find a way to create or preserve a quiet or even silent space in the library for students who need it. Holyoke Community College created a silent study room in their library that has been very successful; Bronx CC's legal studies room, while not intended solely for quiet study, also seems to function as such.

“When I go home, I get distracted easily. My mom's there, cleaning the room, or watching TV, [...] or the computer is always there. [...] Here, it's very quiet, you know, you can't be loud, you can't talk, so I like being under those rules here. I can concentrate a lot better, and I'm actually doing a lot better now in school than last semester.”

We would like to end with this quote from a student at City Tech, and propose that on campuses with physically small libraries – which is the case on many urban and commuter campuses – it’s alright for the library to be a primarily (or even solely) academic space. We understand that this could be a challenge if there’s not much student space on campus, but we might consider resisting overtly social uses of the library if there’s little space available. Students crave an academically serious place for their work, and the library can be that space.



Photo: Robert Barney

Questions?

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Thank you! Please get in touch with any questions, and visit our project website for details on our project design and protocols, as well as materials from other presentations we've given.