

Interrogating One Archival

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For her sociocultural anthropology methods course, undergraduate Rachel Levine is asked to devise a project about some aspect of the university. Motivated by her own on-the-job frustrations as a former residence-hall assistant (RA), Rachel focuses on university housing. She begins with the hunch that there is a “disconnect” between RAs and the housing administration and eventually narrows her study to staff relationships with the senior housing administration in one residence hall. She consults the housing collection in the university archives, interviews an experienced RA, and asks housing staff at various levels to diagram their experience of employee relations. Rachel concludes that residence-hall directors play a pivotal role in the communication between the upper rung of the Housing Administration and RAs. She also concludes that her research is significant because improved communication could lead to greater RA job satisfaction and hence better services for thousands of students.

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the University, Entry at a Time

TIM McDONOUGH, AND CATHERINE PRENDERGAST

Junaid Rana, assistant professor of Asian-American studies at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, teaches a course on Muslims in America. Given the scant extant literature on the Muslim-American student experience or even on Muslims in the state, Professor Rana sends students out to conduct research. He organizes the class into groups that select research projects from a list of topics configured around the course themes; among those chosen are hate crimes and Muslim-American feminism. He thinks of this research as material he could utilize for a possible museum exhibit on the Muslim-American college experience.

At a semi-annual student-research conference at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign (UIUC), Illinois State University (ISU) students present research on campus commitment to environmental initiatives, services for non-traditional students, and campus safety at ISU. But after listening to their peers at the UIUC, they observe that there seems to be far more student activism and public discussion about race and diversity at UIUC than at ISU. They speculate about whether this difference is a consequence of UI's larger and more diverse student population or whether it reflects its recent history, which includes a long struggle over, and the eventual retirement of, a Native American mascot. But then they note that some of their own research revealed a history of tumultuous debate about race and diversity on the ISU campus as well.

What connects these three recent examples of undergraduate research is that they were all completed in courses affiliated with the Ethnography of the University Initiative (EUI, www.eui.uiuc.edu), based at the University of Illinois (UI). The now six-year-old, cross-campus program offers students the opportunity to conduct original ethnographic and archival research on their own institutions and supports faculty who

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guide that research. It helps the researchers and faculty negotiate Institutional Review Board (IRB) clearances, coordinates the use of course-management software, organizes conferences, and maintains publicly accessible online archives of student research findings. EUI is at once research support infrastructure, faculty and student learning community, and broad-based research agenda.

Developmental theorists, student-affairs professionals, and teachers have all argued that students' perspectives offer crucial starting points for learning and development that must be exploited in college classrooms. And indeed, in recent decades, universities have increasingly recognized the importance of engaging students in active learning, relating that learning to students' lived experiences, and helping them recognize that they are creators of knowledge rather than mere recipients of learned truths.

Organizations such as the Council on Undergraduate Research and the National Conferences on Undergraduate Research have spoken about the power and promise of integrating students into faculty members' research, which is a way that many institutions and individuals have attempted to realize this learning potential. But undergraduate involvement in faculty research generally occurs outside traditional course structures and reaches only select students. Universities have yet to make inquiry-based learning standard classroom practice, as the Boyer Commission on Educating Undergraduates in the Research University recommended over a decade ago.

Significant challenges remain in bringing the research discovery process into the classroom. How can faculty incorporate research projects into semester-long courses so that even novice students can ask significant questions and conduct meaningful studies? How can faculty give students the sense that their short-term projects are real contributions to the ongoing dialogue of a community of scholars? Where human subjects are involved, how do faculty secure compliance with increasingly stringent IRB guidelines so that student research can both proceed and be made public? Given the substantial time commitment that supervising student research requires and the lack of commensurate rewards for it in faculty merit and promotion decisions, how can we encourage faculty to routinely invest in guiding this work?

Having now sponsored over 60 courses in which students conduct and archive research, EUI has grappled with precisely these challenges. EUI research is autonomous but nested in a wide array of courses across many disciplines. It takes the university as its subject and builds on students' expertise as both learners and university citizens. The students are encouraged to think beyond their own experience and understand the university as a complex institution with multiple goals, commitments, and stakeholders. EUI relies largely on qualitative and archival methods that develop students' awareness of themselves as historically situated student-scholars whose research on the university, if taken seriously, could be mobilized to change the institution.

THE EUI STORY

In many college courses, the university is used as a research laboratory: Students ask questions about the world by writing research papers about the campus. It was in reading such undergraduate papers that co-founder Nancy Abelmann first wondered why, semester after semester, students should reinvent the wheel on one or another university-related research project. She imagined that the quality of the work would improve if it built on similar work that preceded it and that the ongoing dialogue across semesters would better capture the real research process of seasoned scholars. Her idea: Cull students' research on the University of Illinois from many courses into a website, and thus preserve it.

So she and co-founder, William F. Kelleher, Jr., (now an associate professor of anthropology at Syracuse University) organized a year-long study initiative in 2002-2003 through UI's Center for Advanced Study. The study group included academic professionals, graduate students, undergraduates, and faculty from an array of disciplines—among them library and information sciences, sociology, communications, English, history, and computer sciences. Later it expanded to involve librarians and archivists, specialists in online course management systems, and faculty and students from other disciplines and universities. The group rejected the idea of the university as a stagnant set of departments/units, agreeing instead that for EUI purposes, researchers might more productively conceptualize it as a constellation of competing narratives. (For a record of their work, go to http://www.eui.uiuc.edu/archives_events_03.html.)

In its second year (2003-2004), EUI was designated a cross-campus initiative and given a generous grant that allowed it to hire a program coordinator. Also in that year, the initiative was contracted to study the institution's own jubilee commemoration of the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision. A 10-person project team of undergraduates, graduate students, and faculty documented this broad-based effort to engineer a campus conversation about race and diversity. Their report is now the core of an in-progress co-authored book, *A Hard Year Downstate: A Student Ethnography of Diversity at the University*.

EUI was also a partner recipient of a Ford Foundation grant, *Documenting the Difference that Diversity Makes*, to study how and to what ends students in EUI-affiliated courses studied race and diversity on campus. Those early projects sowed the seeds of one important stream of EUI research: research motivated by questions and concerns of university units themselves.

Currently, EUI is an interdisciplinary, multi-campus endeavor sponsoring six to eight EUI-affiliated courses each semester in disciplines as diverse as anthropology, English, kinesiology, and urban planning. To facilitate dialogue across courses and semesters, EUI asks instructors and students to use a common web-based course-management system (currently, the open-

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source program Moodle) while giving faculty considerable freedom to tailor it to their needs. Some EUI courses are skills-based research methods and writing courses, while others are content-rich courses. For example, in a cross-listed course in anthropology and East Asian languages and cultures, students have conducted studies of UI's robust international student body from East Asia through an array of projects, among them ones on how English language fluency or a degree from the university will serve these students' future goals.

Another EUI course in the College of Education recruits students from the summer McNair Scholars Program, a federally funded program designed to encourage students from under-represented populations to consider careers in academe. McNair participants are invited to enroll in a fall semester of qualitative EUI research to investigate institutional conditions such as those that make programs like McNair necessary in the first place.

Many students who begin projects in EUI courses continue their research through independent studies with faculty in subsequent terms. One graduate student who began as an EUI undergraduate researcher five years ago is now finishing her dissertation, with several EUI faculty serving on her committee. One EUI course can thus promote habits of research that continue over the course of students' higher education careers as they are propelled by their inquiry to seek long-standing relationships with faculty.

Students in the various EUI courses interact through conferences each semester and through the citation of archived files from EUI's past. To date, the EUI archives, which include the work of over 300 students, are housed in the University of Illinois' newly launched open source digital archives, IDEALS (the Illinois Digital Environment for Access to Learning and Scholarship, at <http://www.ideals.uiuc.edu/handle/2142/755>).

Each searchable, abstracted student project captures the research process—from initial queries and preliminary data-gathering to the refinements of early questions and hypotheses to more substantial findings—as well as final results and conclusions. EUI's archives thus preserve a unique record of student learning. And unlike digital portfolio projects that aim to document the learning or writing history of individual students for the purposes of program assessment, these are publicly accessible and designed to be used by future students, professional researchers, and those with interests in the student learning process.

THE RESEARCH

As it comes of age, EUI can report with some confidence on how students approach qualitative and archival research on the university, on the nature of their research foci, and on how they respond to the opportunity to draw from and add to their university's archives.

The projects vary enormously, to some extent in keeping with the foci of EUI courses. This said, there are issues of perennial interest, among them the student body itself. Many projects examine specific student populations, either because the researchers are themselves members of these communities or as a way of meeting a campus "Other." Residence halls, registered student organizations, and campus spaces (e.g., dining halls and cultural centers) provide seemingly bounded social groups and settings that students can study using ethnographic

methods. With many university policies designed to promote diversity and with what is for many students a significant adaptation to living within a diverse community, it is not surprising that many of the research projects explore issues of race and ethnicity.

Another significant body of EUI research interrogates university policies or programs that students either do not fully understand or find objectionable in some way. In a related vein, many students examine issues they consider unaddressed by the university. In these cases, it is students' frustrations that provide the impetus for investigations about how particular practices or policies came to be, whether it be why financial aid checks are often slow to be delivered or what the campus has or has not done to become more "green."

While inquiry is often motivated by students' own curiosities and interests, EUI's commitment to studying the university challenges students to "think institutionally," to consider the ways in which the university shapes and intervenes in their lives. Students often pass through universities with little knowledge of the histories, mandates, regulations, economies, or values that have structured university organization and practices. Even a brief foray in the archives helps students to see the university as an evolving institution and to appreciate the historical specificity of their own inquiries. Likewise, through the textual analysis of even one university document, such as a department mission statement or a program flier, students can discover the various, and sometimes contradictory, commitments of the university and appreciate that these various commitments often mean that simple solutions to problems are elusive.



EUI has identified four ways in which student work “goes institutional.” First and simplest are research topics, such as a department’s required courses or a university unit’s policies, that are so obviously determined by university rules and regulations that the university-as-agent is very easy to conceptualize and study.

Second are the projects in which a university value or commitment can be easily identified, such as the assumption that the successful student should have a rich extracurricular life, even though few rules or regulations enforce this value. In some cases, students recognize that these values are demonstrated by an *absence* of attention, as did the one who was interested in the university’s effect on students who arrive at college in a pre-existing romantic relationship and concluded that although such students have particular needs and experiences, they are an unrecognized demographic.

Third are projects in which students examine how the university itself is governed by national or other bodies. One student, for example, wanted to understand why in a period of budget cuts the university library decided to get rid of many of its photocopy machines—a measure that he deemed had academic repercussions. As it turned out, a national association of university libraries had made a recommendation to this effect.

Fourth, and perhaps most subtle, are those projects that appear to take up entirely personal aspects of student life: the

clothes students wear, the music they listen to, the food they eat and so on. In these cases, the researchers often begin to consider how the campus is organized spatially and what that configuration—perhaps inadvertently—supports or encourages. For example, a student interested in friendships made at college began to ask how various residence hall spaces facilitate or impede social interactions among students.

Sometimes the research leads to a not-always-welcome critique of the institution. Such self-scrutiny, however, can make for more vibrant and responsive institutions that pay attention to the experiences and, in this case, the research findings of its primary consumers. Studying the campus ultimately fosters students’ sense of themselves as stakeholders who are attentive to the university’s effects, feel responsible for it, and think they have the capacity to enact change within it.

Indeed, EUI encourages students to make concrete recommendations on the basis of their research findings, however tentative. Those recommendations often address both the university and future generations of student researchers—counseling the university on measures it might take and future peers on how they might advance a particular research agenda. Making these sorts of recommendations pushes students to think about research in translational terms and inspires them to identify the limitations of their own assumptions, methods, and data. By drawing upon the work of former students, current researchers come to see the contribution that their own findings can make to the university’s intellectual legacy and archival footprint.

The very act of seeing—and then using—“published” student research leads students to appreciate their own coursework differently, as material that may find its way into the archives. Since the summer 2007 launching of the IDEALS collection, the sense of what it means to be published has intensified because of the considerable attention the collection has gotten from both scholars and reporters. Current senior Anona Whitley, for example, was questioned by a Chicago reporter about her project on Korean Americans on campus. She described the experience this way: “It was nice to know that some of the work that undergraduate students do is actually being used People are finally paying attention to us as intelligent producers of knowledge, which gives the learning process a bit more meaning Some of our work is worth looking at, particularly that concerning the university because it is our daily lived reality!”

Students draw on the archives in a variety of ways. Most obviously, perhaps, they find research devoted to the same topic. As one noted, for example, “[This student]’s study will help give me some background information of where La Casa [a Latina culture house at UI] was a year ago and how that relates to today.”

Often students identify projects that have asked similar sorts of questions, although not necessarily on the same topic. In one instance a student researching student satisfaction about a particular degree program found parallels in another’s work on student satisfaction with a service-learning program.

Many students get methodological tips from the archives, such as the student who found what he considered a great “first question” to pose in an interview, and some students have followed secondary literature leads in archived projects or found handy academic concepts applicable to their own projects.

Students also offer critiques when their work contradicts the findings of previous research or differentiate themselves as



researchers from their predecessors. As one student reflected, “This [student’s] article did not simply contain new ... information and references about veterans with disabilities, it also implicitly offered me as a reader/researcher insight into the author’s own moral sensibilities and assumptions of why particular university responses to educating and integrating soldier-students with disabilities were morally right or wrong.”

Constructing the EUI archives has meant seeking permission to use students’ intellectual property, which provides insights into how students think about their own work. At the end of each semester, EUI gives students the opportunity, via an intellectual property contract, to archive their projects under their own name or a pseudonym. In some cases, positive feedback on their work (through public presentations at EUI conferences and other mechanisms) has led students to archive under their names rather than anonymously. In fact, when given the opportunity to make their work publicly accessible, the majority of students do so.

Still unclear is *why* students make the decisions they do about whether to archive, and under what name, as well as the role the intellectual property contract plays in those decisions. Also unexplored is how students understand the terms of the contract they sign and how they conceptualize their academic work as their own intellectual property or understand the university’s interest in making their work publicly available. These are topics that EUI has just begun to study.

A final point of interest is how studying one’s own university influences student engagement with the university and other institutions beyond the classroom and after the course. Some students provide feedback and recommendations to university programs on the basis of their findings, and some have formed action groups as a result of their research. EUI has seen that critical engagement with the university can prepare students to be engaged citizens who actively contribute to public life, but it has yet to systematically document the ways in which this happens.

REMAINING CHALLENGES

While EUI provides inquiry-based learning experiences for students, support for faculty, and potential benefits to the university community as a whole through institutional self-reflection, it faces a number of challenges as it seeks to build a collaborative research community addressing a common agenda. Collaboration across courses and semesters (via the archives) requires deliberate design.

A meta-Moodle network offers the possibility to greatly enhance the exchange and development of ideas: All EUI courses are linked, potentially allowing students in any EUI-affiliated course online access to the course resources, discussion forums, and student projects of any other EUI-affiliated course. But the challenge has been finding a way to encourage students to take advantage of this possibility. Both faculty and students need

incentives to mine the work of their peers in other classes and on other campuses. The research experience will be greatly enhanced to the extent that students are able to envision themselves as part of real communities of inquiry, but it is no trivial matter to engineer this sort of communication.

In the classroom, EUI struggles to find the best ways to help students think institutionally. Not all EUI research “goes institutional”; for some students the university remains simply a setting and is not envisioned as an agent of any kind. This challenge extends to faculty participants as well, many of whom think of the university as little more than the backdrop to their own academic lives.

The health of EUI relies on nurturing faculty who want to teach in the program year after year. EUI makes considerable demands on faculty—as mentors, as overseers of legal agreements, and as members of a larger research and pedagogical community—and there must be commensurate returns. In addition to the high-quality student work that EUI has the potential to foster, faculty may also invest in EUI because they can use the archives for their own investigations, since they have a hand in sculpting the collection by directing their students’ work.

As EUI matures, it also faces the considerable challenge of how to create meaningful feedback loops within our universities. While it is untenable for each student project to demand an audience, there are findings that are worthy of the attention of various university units. The challenge is to engineer the match-making that this requires in a way that does not overly tax university units, administrators, or the students themselves.

Finally, and most significantly, EUI requires university support. In its early years EUI co-directors envisioned that increasing faculty technological literacy as well as the initiative’s mature web footprint would substantially lessen the oversight demands of the project. This has not proven to be the case. Each new cohort of faculty

needs to be trained to use the course software system and the archives and, most importantly, to establish IRB compliance and intellectual property rights. The project demands perpetual oversight and hence institutional commitment to fund staffing. While EUI is a relatively inexpensive and cost-effective program, it is challenged to find “hard” funding sources within shrinking university budgets.

But all this said, we would argue for the immense value of the initiative. Amid increasing calls for universities to improve and assess the effectiveness of academic programs and develop students’ sense of civic agency [Editor’s note: see Harry Boyte’s article in the May/June 2008 issue of *Change*], EUI provides a powerful model for how to foster inquiry-based courses, maintain an open record of student learning, and foster student agency. EUI also demonstrates how student research can be a vital source of institutional self-reflection, leading to greater institutional responsiveness. □

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