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Students Study Up the University

Perspectives Gained in Student Research
on the University as Institution

Gina Hunter

Ethnography has been described as “a portrait of a people, . . . a written description of a particular culture—the customs, beliefs, and behavior—based on information collected through fieldwork” (Harris and Johnson 2000: 5). As a research methodology, ethnographic fieldwork generally consists of participant observation (sustained and direct interaction with a social group in the context of their daily lives), often in combination with in-depth interviewing and other means of qualitative data collection. Ethnographic research is distinctive in relation to other methodologies for privileging researcher subjectivity and for its practitioners’ attention to issues of writing and representation (Clifford 1986: 13–15).

As it developed within anthropology and sociology, ethnography’s objective has been to uncover the largely implicit social rules that govern social behavior, the unique cultural logic of participants in a defined social group. One problematic legacy of this has been a tendency of ethnographers to define their field in terms of a homogeneous, coherent social group that is also in some way distinctive and different. In anthropology, the archetypal subjects of ethnographic research were members of exotic, tribal societies; in sociology, they were immigrants, deviants, and minorities.

It was against this abundance of social science fieldwork among poor and minority groups that anthropologist Laura Nader (1972) called on ethnographers to “study up” the power and bureaucratic structures of U.S. society.

Nader advocated the “study of the colonizers rather than the colonized, the culture of power rather than the culture of the powerless, the culture of affluence rather than the culture of poverty” (289). Nader argued that inquiry into the elite and power structures reorients the kinds of questions ethnographers ask and the theoretical frames used to understand them. She also argued that research into power structures of U.S. society was key to educating citizens to effectively intervene and exercise their rights within these institutions. Such education is crucial for our democracy given that “most members of complex societies and certainly most Americans do not know enough about, nor do they know how to cope with, the people, institutions and organizations which most affect their lives” (294).

Although more than four decades have passed since Nader’s pleas, her approach has been “disappointingly undeveloped” (Heyman 2004: 487; see also Edwards 2007). Of those who did embrace her call to study up, Nader argues that they often failed to also study “down” and “sideways,” that is, to show the impact of powerful elites and institutions on the everyday lives of others (Nader 1999).

For those of us who foster student inquiry in our college classrooms, an opportunity for engaged citizenship and critical inquiry into powerful institutions is quite literally all around us. The university is after all probably the most proximate bureaucratic structure in students’ lives. It is also an institution about which they, as students, hold “native” expertise. Ethnographic inquiry into the university is one way to harness students’ unique knowledge of and special position within the university while, at the same time, helping them question the often taken-for-granted aspects of their university experience. Teaching students to critically engage and research this institution can be one means of fostering greater citizenship. In addition, student research on the university likely has relevance to a number of local audiences beyond the classroom. By providing opportunities for students to share their original research with these audiences, we teach students about the real stakes of authorship and scholarship.

Ethnography of the University Initiative

In this essay I present a particular way of looking at the university (and other institutions) and a way of guiding student research that comes largely from the Ethnography of the University Initiative (EUI), an interdisciplinary multicampus project based at the University of Illinois, which fosters student ethnographic and archival research on their own universities. For the purposes of ethnographic investigation, EUI defines the university as “a highly

complex social and cultural institution communicating diverse missions, values and identities” (University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign 2011) and challenges students to think beyond their straightforward notion of the university as a place or setting. This is a discursive approach that brings into awareness the kinds of categories, vocabularies, and specialized knowledge used by institutions to organize relations and guide actions.

In EUI courses students record their work (such as field notes, reflections, and excerpts from interview transcripts) in a course management system (currently Moodle) in order to capture some of the research process. At the end of the course, students have the opportunity to archive both the processual documents and final research products in an online database so that future students and researchers may use and build on their work.¹ EUI hopes that students who use previous students’ research and then contribute their own work to the archives will see themselves as both producers and users of knowledge. EUI also hopes that by studying their own universities, students will become aware of themselves as university stakeholders and generators of information and analyses that have the potential to challenge received wisdom and improve the university. To this end, EUI encourages students to use their research findings and conclusions, however tentative and preliminary, to make recommendations about how their universities might be improved (Hunter et al. 2008: 45).

In what follows I contrast an institutional approach to ethnography to other approaches to teaching ethnography. I describe my ethnography course and focus on two student projects to show how students’ perspectives on the university changed as a result of their research activities. I then contrast these with less successful projects and discuss the challenges all students faced in their semester-long projects. These beginning students learned that ethnography is more than writing thick description or a means of collecting data, but rather is a reflexive process that requires developing a new “way of seeing” (Wolcott 2008). Specifically, students had to learn to “see” institutionally and how to formulate suitable questions for ethnographic exploration of their universities. At a minimum, student research on the university led to greater awareness of campus resources and communities, but it also provided many students with an expanded and critical understanding of university interests and missions.

Approaches to Teaching Introductory Ethnography

James Spradley and David McCurdy’s 1972 *The Cultural Experience: Ethnography in Complex Society* marked a turning point for teaching ethnographic

research to undergraduate students. These authors emphasized ethnography as a discovery process open to beginners, rather than a theory-driven process requiring considerable prior expertise. They demonstrated how ethnographic inquiry could be used to explore relatively familiar cultural scenes, later called *microcultures*, such as workplace environments, that are easily accessible to North American students. In this approach, students are encouraged to choose social groups or microcultures with which they are not already too familiar so that they will be able to maintain naïveté and notice differences—much like an anthropologist entering a foreign society. Spradley and McCurdy’s textbook is still widely used in undergraduate classrooms and recently entered its second edition (McCurdy, Spradley, and Shandy 2005). In addition, a number of other introductory textbooks (Crane and Angrosino 1992; Fetterman 1989; Kutsche 1998; Angrosino 2002; Sunstein and Chiseri-Strater 2002) also encourage students to identify and decipher the contours of a local microculture that is new to them—be it truckers (Zollo in Sunstein and Chiseri-Strater 2002: 26), homeless men and women (Lewis in Kutsche 1998: 182), or some other distinctive, observable “little community” (Redfield 1956) of interacting people (see also Crane and Angrosino’s chapter on planning a community study). In order to investigate such social groups, students must gain access to a new community and grapple with the ethical issues involved in human subjects research. When successful, students learn to observe closely, analyze, and sensitively represent unfamiliar “others.” These are valuable skills that can open students’ eyes to the power of cross-cultural research and ethnographic writing.

One problem with the microculture approach, however, is that it is based on a concept of culture that oversimplifies the nature of social groups and communities. *Culture* is a notoriously hard to define and problematic concept, but few scholars today refer to cultures as bounded, uniform communities. Some have argued that the concept of culture itself exaggerates the homogeneity and distinctiveness of social groups and overemphasizes our sense of communities as delimited and discrete (Abu-Lughod 1991). A related problem with our everyday notions of culture and community is that they too easily lead us to categories of “insiders” versus “outsiders” rather than to the recognition that all people in a particular social setting are variously positioned, including the ethnographer. Greater self-consciousness about the ethnographic endeavor has led most to acknowledge that an ethnographer’s categories tell us as much about the orientation of the author as they do about those under ethnographic scrutiny (Wolcott 2008: 97). Ethnographic writing is never an act of simply taking down facts but rather an active process of selec-

tion and interpretation (Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw 1995: 4–15). Although a plethora of ethnographic fieldwork manuals exist, “The technicalities of field interviews or organizing field notes are not the problem. . . . [It is] what goes on in the relation between ethnographer and research participants and how to interpret field notes” (Sluka and Robben 2007: 26–27). Yet such theoretical discussions are not found in most step-by-step ethnographic guides, maybe because these books, despite multiple editions, are rooted in an earlier social science or maybe because their authors find the concerns beyond the scope of students’ first forays into ethnography. A focus on one locale or defined social group may help to define and delimit students’ short, semester projects and help students hone skills of detailed ethnographic observation and description. Sending students out to study a local “subculture,” however, may also reinforce erroneous ideas about community and culture.

A second theoretical problem relates to the applicability of ethnographic knowledge. The gift of ethnography lies in its fine-grained descriptions of social interactions and settings. How to link the microlevel data to macrolevel forces is a matter of considerable debate (see Burawoy et al. 1991). While developing or reconstructing sociological theories may be an ultimate goal of ethnographic research,² this is far beyond the reach of most first-time ethnographers. On the other hand, ethnographic research is impotent if its insights are limited to a single unique case that cannot be connected to issues and problems larger than the research site. In fact, to leave it at that would simply lead to another common problem of ethnographic work, “the ethnographic fallacy . . . which begins when observations are taken at face value” (Stephen Steinberg, qtd. in Duneier 1999: 343). “Too often—not always—ethnography suffers from a myopia that sharply delineates the behavior at close range but obscures the less visible structures and processes that engender and sustain the behavior” (343). As sociologist Mitchell Duneier notes, even seasoned ethnographers find it hard to discern the links between the microlevel of observed interactions and the larger forces that set those interactions into motion. They may attempt to avoid this myopia by asking readers simply to make a leap of faith that larger economic, social, or political forces are at work even if they are not captured through the ethnographic lens. In his ethnography of sidewalk magazine vendors in New York City, Duneier found, for example, that homeless men’s stories of their life on the sidewalk rarely accounted for the ways race and class segregation, joblessness, and family circumstances conspired to leave some men with few alternatives.

The solution for Duneier was to shift his attention to “middle-range” work, “focusing on how institutions of various sorts, especially institutions

that organize power, affect the microsettings [he] studied” (344). Explaining what happened on the sidewalk required Duneier to extend his fieldwork from the street corner and into the offices of city council members and business district planners, into the commercial establishments that attempted to bar homeless men from using their restrooms, and into the public facilities the men were forced to rely on. The result is a critical ethnography that situates and explains the world of the sidewalk within multiple contexts, including some that are invisible to the street vendors themselves.

Likewise, institutional ethnography can help students take the first steps toward the kind of middle-range work that Duneier describes. It provides a framework for critical analysis by placing microlevel data with a context of specific university histories, rhetoric, and practices. For example, consider the novice ethnographer who decides to study the social world of a residence hall cafeteria. The perceptive ethnographer might note the gendered nature of lunchtime banter or notice the racial or ethnic self-segregation common in many campus cafeterias. To explain these observations, the ethnographer will likely have to leap between the contained, observable world of the cafeteria to very large explanatory frameworks such as gender and race. Meanwhile, an obvious, middle-range, overdetermining characteristic of the social actors in question may recede into the unexamined background — their status as students. A focus on the diners *as students* brings into light a whole series of explicit codes of conduct (such as university policies or the student handbook) and implicit social roles (such as that of coming-of-age youth) to which they are assigned.

The institutional approach of my course, and of the larger EUI initiative, diverges considerably from organizational ethnography (Crane and Angrosino 1992), which privileges the organizational chart of the institution and the various statuses and roles that members hold. It shares much with Dorothy Smith’s (2005) *Institutional Ethnography* (see also Campbell and Gregor 2004), which focuses on making visible from a certain standpoint how people are connected through extended social relations and understanding how texts mediate institutional regimes (though this work is largely inaccessible to undergraduate students). The approach often begins by examining institutional discourses, following how they are put to work and what gets left out. Students possess a “native” understanding of their own institutional standing by age, credit hours attained, financial aid status, and major field of study, but they tend to think of these as simply “facts,” as we all do most of the time. These facts, however, were created for a purpose, often in the interest of university goals and objectives — they are “stylized facts” (Scott 1998),

facts that present the world in a specific way. The point is to ask how and why such categories are created. Using these categories, what does the university see, and where might it be blind? When and where is a student's racial identity, for example, important to the university? When is it invisible? How and when, if ever, does religious affiliation matter to the university, and why? It is relatively easy to train students in ethnographic data collection techniques but far more difficult to teach analysis (Jordan and Yamauchi 2008). A focus on institutional discourses and stylized facts helps students take these first analytical steps.

In short, an institutional approach to ethnographic training does not require students to become versed in macrolevel social theories but does foster the sociological imagination by connecting the experiences of people on the ground to forces and structures external to the social situation in question. The institutional focus does not require, or benefit from, researcher naïveté or unfamiliarity with the social environment under study. Rather, it requires learning to “see institutionally” and to question the stylized facts and accepted categories used by the institution. Institutional ethnography encourages and enables students to interrogate institutional arrangements and adds a critical element to their ethnographic research as they begin to question whether the way things are is the way they ought to be. This is exactly what many students in my ethnographic methods course began to do.

The Ethnography Course

My ethnographic methods course at Illinois State University, a public university of about 20,000 students, is a regularly offered elective course that typically enrolls twenty to twenty-five junior-level sociology and anthropology students. Generally students have little knowledge of ethnography before enrolling in the course. Although there are common course exercises and readings, the bulk of the course is centered on students' own ethnographic research projects about ISU, which start within the first few weeks of the course. I use a textbook and readings to provide brief introductions to the history and uses of ethnography, examples of ethnographic writing, and illustrations of specific ethnographic techniques. Because we will be writing about the university, we also read several short articles on issues in American higher education and the history of ISU in particular. We discuss research ethics and examine the preapproved protocol from the institutional review board (IRB) that I secure for the student research before the semester begins.

Structured research exercises allow students to try out techniques, such as various kinds of interviewing, that they may want to use within

their own projects. Although I privilege standard ethnographic methods, the students' data collection techniques emerge from their areas of substantive concern and may include surveys or focus groups. In this way, methodology is not divorced from central research questions as is sometimes the case in "methods" textbooks.

As students begin their research, they use an online course management system and a template for organizing and recording their data. The basic template categories are "abstract," "about the author," "initial exercises," "question," "plan," "data," "discuss," "recommend," and "reflect." Students periodically add entries as they proceed through their projects while leaving previous entries intact in order to make the research process transparent. The idea is that by scaffolding their research activities, a large project can be divided up into smaller, less daunting segments (although I note below that this intended result was not always achieved). Final papers, presentation slides, photos, and other materials are also uploaded to the site. At the end of the semester, students have the option to archive this work in the EUI collection in the University of Illinois's Illinois Digital Environment for Access for Learning and Scholarship.

Eighteen students completed the fall 2007 course. In spring 2008, I invited one of these students, Cassandra Garcia, to be my research assistant for this study. I obtained IRB approval for the study and invited students who had been members of the course to join as participants. Eleven students agreed to participate and consented to an audio-recorded interview with Cassi and to my use of the written assignments and research they completed for the course.³ Interestingly, the students who agreed to participate in this study were not confined to those who received the top scores in the course (six received an A and four received lower grades). Data for this study come from three sources: (1) students' research documents in the EUI archives, (2) ungraded self-reflection essays that students wrote at the midpoint and the end of fall semester for which I asked students to write about what they were learning or had learned and their thoughts on how the course was going/had gone, and (3) transcripts and notes from interviews with students who were enrolled in the ethnography course conducted by Cassi, the student researcher who had herself been a member of the course.

Although I had accompanied all students through the research during the semester, it was possible for me to understand students' struggles and concerns only through the analysis of themes in their reflection essays and the retrospective interviews. Students' research documents included field notes, first attempts at analysis, and other reporting but captured only a shallow

residue of what I knew to be students' research efforts. In the learning reflection essays, which I did not read until after the course finished, students more freely expressed frustration and concerns than they had to me in the class or in their research documents. Interviews after the course provided me with a sense of what students took away from the course and their thoughts on the research experience several months after it was completed, unlike the reflection essays, which were written as students were still in the grips of turning in final papers and making presentations.

Student Research on the University

Beyond the requirement to research the university, I allowed students to propose their own topics. In teaching this course over several years, I have noted that anthropology students often choose to research a university "other," often a minority social group, through which they can fulfill their expectations of encountering difference in anthropological fieldwork. Sociology students come to ethnography to learn a "qualitative" method. They design projects that use the required techniques of participant observation and interviewing as supplements to survey research. A key teaching effort at the beginning of the course, then, is to help frame an institutional inquiry out of student-defined interests and to guide students to the ways that inquiry might be ethnographically explored. Achieving these two elements often required that I take a heavy hand in shaping the direction of student research.

Many students proposed research questions that at first seemed to have little to do with the university. One student, for example, wondered whether students practice safer-sex behaviors and imagined conducting a survey on student sexual behavior. This is of course an interesting question, and in fact many researchers, including a sociologist at ISU (Sprecher, Harris, and Meyers 2008), have tracked college students' reported sexual behaviors and attitudes longitudinally. This line of inquiry, however, at least as the student framed it, was not an institutional investigation. Yet rather than reject the line of inquiry, I helped him revise it to better fulfill the university focus of the course. I urged the student to ask, for example, whether the university was interested in student sexual behaviors and whether this had changed over time. How does the university attempt to intervene in students' sex lives? What sexual health programs or safer-sex campaigns does the university offer, and are they effective? With questions such as these, the student begins to acknowledge and explore the university's varied interests (or lack thereof) in monitoring students' sexual health or shaping their sexual activities. Methodologically, these questions lend themselves to ethnographic

inquiry — the student might conduct interviews with campus health services staff members, look into the history of university recordkeeping on this topic, talk to resident assistants and others who organize sexual health programs, participate in related campus events, and record students' opinions of such services.

Many students chose topics with seemingly straightforward links to the institution, such as a particular student organization or a specific university policy, but even so, students did not immediately grasp how a study of their organization or policy would lead to an analysis of the university at large (as shown in the cases of student work below). Students started from their own “native” expertise and assumptions but found that the university became increasingly unfamiliar to them as they investigated university rhetoric and practice. For most students, an awareness of the university as institution and agent came about through the research process itself and therefore later in the semester.

The topics of student research projects in the fall 2009 course could be evenly grouped into three categories: those that examined official registered student organizations (RSOs) (5), those that focused on a defined student population (5), and those that took up specific university policies or practices (5). Studies of RSOs (which included Christian organizations, fraternities, a gay and lesbian student organization, and a Latino student organization) focused on how and why students become members, the history of the organization, or the organization's roles on campus. Those projects that focused on student populations included those defined by ethnic or sexual identity (e.g., Latino/a students or lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender students) or those defined by their status at the university (e.g., foreign exchange students, nontraditional students, residence hall assistants, or major field of study). Such projects focused on the challenges these students face by virtue of their identity or status on campus. The specific university policies and practices that students examined included the university's environmental policy, safety policies and procedures, and academic advisement practices. Three projects that fell out of these categories included a study of Capture the Flag, a game students regularly play on the quad; a study of students' definitions of community; and a project about students' study habits.

The following are accounts of two successful projects of students I call Stacey and Lynn, in which I show how students grappled with key issues in ethnography and gained a new understanding of the university. Their projects were not confined to any one microsetting, though the questions they asked were narrowly focused and locally situated. Like all the research

done in the course, these were brief miniprojects, rather than full-fledged studies. Both struggled at some point to “see” the university or to understand the relevance of their own inquiry and data for understanding the university at large, but each managed to successfully articulate this link in their final papers. Each of them ended up with a different understanding of the university than when she began.

Stacey’s Study of Campus Sustainability: Will the Redbirds Go “Green”?

Stacey’s inquiry started with a gripe. As an anthropology and environmental science major, Stacey had come to campus hoping to find a dynamic “green” movement and university commitment to sustainability. She was disappointed by the lack of an active student movement and was aware of very few campus environmental initiatives. Assuming that the university had little interest in sustainability, she asked “[Does] the University [practice] what it preaches to students? In other words, does the environmental concern that is taught in specific classes [at ISU] resonate with University practices and policy?” (Moodle page). I suggested she conduct some preliminary Internet research to find out what other universities were doing in this arena. Some weeks later she revised her question to ask, “Why has the university not made a visible effort to create a green campus? . . . Does the university view itself as an environmentally-friendly institution?” (Moodle page).

She started her investigation by interviewing her former environmental science professor, someone she knew had a long history with local environmental activism. The professor expressed his frustration at attempting to mobilize the campus and administration around environmental concerns. From his perspective, the problem was not that ISU lacked a stated policy; it was that “[ISU’s environmental initiative] was more of a smoke screen. . . . He felt that the university was only interested in saving money (through conservation efforts)” (final paper).

Meanwhile we learned that ISU had just established a sustainability coordinator position, and Stacey discovered through media releases that ISU was only the thirty-fifth university in the United States to establish such a position. A staff member commented to me that it was highly unusual that the position at ISU came from the top administration rather than “from below” as a response to a campus environmental movement. I found this fascinating and encouraged Stacey to look into the specificities of ISU in relation to what had happened at other campuses. Stacey resisted; she did not really see the significance, and in any case, she failed to uncover how policies at other schools had come about or the deliberations regarding the position at ISU.

Stacey noted that the ISU administration had spearheaded a number of programs, such as establishing a campus “Green Team” committee in 2000 and creating a sustainability coordinator position in 2007, but a key faculty member was skeptical about the university’s interests and track record, and she noted that student-led environmental initiatives were nonexistent or invisible. As part of a course assignment, Stacey conducted historical research on environmental activism at ISU and planned to continue her ethnographic investigation by interviewing members of student groups and talking to random students about their knowledge of the university’s green programs. Her work in the university archives revealed that in the 1970s ISU students held annual Earth Day parades that drew large numbers of students to the quad, suggesting that ISU had once been the site of an active environmental movement. She also learned that one current student organization, the Students Environmental Action Committee (SEAC), had been in existence for more than a decade. Currently those students were engaged in a number of small recycling projects but lacked and desired specific directives from their faculty sponsor; they were not involved in activism per se. She also found that when the administration set up the ISU Green Team in 2000, they formed a new student committee rather than inviting members of SEAC to participate. Stacey began to think that ISU’s problem was not a lack commitment to environmental concerns and activities but lack of communication and coordination among various campus constituencies.

She wanted to talk to the new sustainability coordinator but dragged her feet because, as I later discovered in her reflection essay, she was intimidated at the prospect of talking to an administrator. When she did finally interview the head of facilities and the new sustainability coordinator, she came away with a new sense of why sustainability might be important to the university:

In the next few years there will be a declining number of students who will be attending college. Whereas in the past, students had to be marketable to universities, now universities have to be marketable to students. . . . At a time when environmental awareness is becoming a national trend . . . being a sustainable institution looks very impressive. Incoming freshmen will be looking towards innovative schools that can lead students to be leaders in the forefront of sustainability, and ISU wants to be that innovative school. (final paper)

The sustainability coordinator, new to campus, was just coming to realize the communication and coordination problems on campus and was interested in student involvement; she encouraged Stacey to share the results of her research with the Sustainability Office.

Through her research project, Stacey found “the exact opposite” of what she expected to find: “The school is actually doing a lot, it’s just really unseen” (interview with the author, 22 March 2008). Her opinion of ISU had changed, too. She respected the university’s recent sustainability efforts but became even more critical of her peers and the lack of a student activism on campus. She speculated that such a movement would be very powerful on campus in light of national sustainability trends and the university’s increasing need to market itself to students:

Students have no idea how much power they [w]ield in this University . . . so many students go to class and they go party and there is not a connection with [the university]. . . . I realized that my place within the University was important. To know that I could go in and get students together, if we had enough who care, and that we are the basis [for change]. [After doing this research,] I like [ISU] better . . . [but] I’ve become more critical of the students. . . . Why don’t students realize they have so much power? (22 March 2008 interview)

Stacey continued her research through the subsequent semester and shared her results with ISU’s sustainability coordinator. Her research experience and findings influenced her own future career plans. She plans to attend graduate school in anthropology and environmental studies but wants a career in action-based environmental work, rather than teaching as she had once imagined.

*Lynn’s Ethnography of Unity, a Campus Christian RSO:
Where Is Community at the University?*

Lynn, a senior in sociology, was an engaged, critical student who came into my course with some understanding of ethnographic methods based on previous sociology courses, experience in documentary photography, and having read Mitchell Duneier’s book *Slim’s Table* (1992) as a teenager. At the beginning of the semester, Lynn thought of ethnography as “hanging out with people and then writing about it” (reflection essay). She was attracted to the narrative aspects of ethnography, but the word *research* made her “cringe” (reflection essay).

For her ethnographic project she chose to focus on a Christian RSO called Unity, in which she was an active member. She described her participation in Unity as one of the most important aspects of her college life. Through Unity, Lynn found a group of welcoming students and developed a sense of belonging. She wanted to study and write about this community. When she

learned of the requirement to study some aspect of the university, she thought “the university? Like, what the hell do I care about the university? . . . [I thought] it was boring, [as in] ‘Let’s study bureaucracy!’” (interview with the author, 21 March 2008). Repelled by the university focus, she did not at first see how her project would make the “university link.” With some prodding on my part, however, she discovered that her interests related directly to university discourses on “student involvement,” a key issue for administrators charged with improving student retention and success. Lynn became sympathetic to university goals in this area but critical of the types of involvement the university seemed to promote.

Lynn delved into her ethnographic data collection with enthusiasm, taking copious notes on Unity events, conducting interviews with three staff members, two student leaders, and two student participants, and taking hundreds of photographs. Lynn enjoyed this documentary work immensely, and she saw that her participant observation produced data that could be linked to various research topics and literatures. She still had little interest in connecting it to any discussion of the university. In a midterm reflection essay, she wrote: “My topic can easily be linked to the university, but to be honest, this kind of inductive research leads itself in many ways, and the data and questions I’ve gathered so far are not leading me toward an analysis of the university. It seems as though a link to the university would, at this point, be sort of forced and unconnected to the project.” By the end of the semester, however, she had changed her mind about the centrality of the institutional analysis to the questions that most motivated her inquiry.

Because she was interested in the “sense of belonging” that she and others had found through Unity, I encouraged her to consider reasons behind the ISU’s broader push for students to “get involved” in the campus community, and I suggested that she document how Unity works organizationally to create such a community. Indeed, Unity staff members themselves, in Lynn’s interviews with them, often focused on the difficulty of creating an enduring sense of community in a college environment where the population is, by nature, transitory. She realized that even though an analysis of the university was not the only direction she could take the research, it was integral to the questions about belonging and community that she was most interested in. In fact, she came to the conclusion that religious RSOs like Unity play a vital role on the ISU campus, yet the university largely ignores the contributions of religious organizations as a principal venue for student-campus connections. Reflecting on her research in an interview, she noted:

I remember realizing *just how much the University doesn't talk to itself*. . . . I mean Illinois State University said in several places that it is dedicated to developing a sense of community among its students. Well it is not being active in a lot of the places where community is actually being developed. . . . I don't think that was something specific to ISU, I mean, I think that is just a problem with large institutions. (21 March 2008; emphasis added)

Lynn's interests and the university's were parallel, although Lynn had not seen this early on. She concluded that Unity's successes were invisible to the university because it is a Christian RSO within a public university.

In her final paper and presentation to the class, Lynn made a forceful critique of the dean of students' "Get Involved" Web site, which highlights the Greek system. She wondered aloud why the university should so prominently feature these organizations over others, given the sometimes unhealthy behaviors associated with Greek life. She observed that ISU had twenty-six registered fraternities and sororities versus eighteen registered religious organizations. However, she noted that "while most Greek organizations cut off chapter membership at around thirty students, religious organizations . . . gather hundreds of students each week. . . . It appears that more students are engaging in religious activities with campus ministries than are joining frats or sororities." Her final paper described the organizational structure of Unity and the kinds of informal networks Unity provides students. She suggested that the university refocus its student involvement campaigns away from Greek life and proposed that the organizational structure of Unity might serve as a model for other student organizations.

In an interview the semester after the course, Lynn featured her institutional analysis prominently as she described her course project:

I was really interested in community, like a sense of belonging among students . . . because I am aware that that is something that is essential not only to the college experience, *but something that the university really talks about as though they are intent on promoting*. . . . I have become really connected to this school and it's had very little to do with my classes or school spirit. Like, you know, I'll never do that "I'm a Redbird!" [sarcastic tone]. But there is something about this school here that my heart is attached to . . . and for me that was this group [Unity] and so I wanted to kind of figure what that meant from the experience of other students engaging in [Unity]. (21 March 2008; emphasis added)

Lynn had become a critical consumer of the university discourse on student involvement. Her own collegiate experience highlighted the importance of

involvement, yet she did not buy into the sports team or Greek system means of investment.

Lynn initially thought of the university as a rule-setting, formal bureaucracy that had little to do with her interests in the Unity RSO. She felt differently by the end, saying in her interview, “The university is not *the man*, and I don’t have to think of it solely as a bureaucracy.” The university no longer seemed like an impersonal and oppressive force, and she became sympathetic to the university’s student involvement goals, even if critical about how they proposed students go about achieving them. Although she did not realize it at first, Unity’s links to the university were key to its mission and key to her own experience with the group. “[The requirement to study the university] allowed us to understand our own circumstances better. It was weird for me because *I wanted to research something that was inherently part of the university, but I didn’t think of it that way*. So I guess, if nothing else, the university link required me to acknowledge that . . . the group I was studying was part of the university, *that it was connected to the university in a way that I hadn’t really explored or understood*” (21 March 2008 interview; emphasis added). In particular, she came to see that the organization she cared about was shaped in response to the college campus environment — a community formed in part because college students may find themselves adrift and in need of safe spaces where they can share day-to-day trials with like-minded individuals.

Seeing the University Ethnographically

In each of the previous cases, students learned something about the ethnographic process and something about the university through their own investigations. What did they learn about the university? Stacey’s initial beliefs about the university’s lack of interest in environmental sustainability were not confirmed by her research. Lynn uncovered a blind spot in institutional perspectives on student involvement. Beyond the specificities of their own topical interests, each student described her new awareness of institutional interests.

Indeed, *all* sampled students affirmed that they had learned something new about the university, at least in the narrow sense of programs, facts, or history about ISU that they had been unaware of previously. At a minimum, students found that the university became a “bigger” place — that is, they all reported that they became more aware of campus resources, diverse campus communities, or local issues. For two students in the sample, learning about the university did not appear to have gone beyond this limited perspec-

tive. Every other student reported and showed in their projects that they, like Stacey and Lynn, began to “think about the university in ways [they] never thought of before.” Specifically, they noted the university’s competing commitments and need to market itself, its enduring history and hierarchy, and the diversity of political interests on campus, as the following quotes show:

A lot of our projects [show] what the university does to represent safety or represent difference . . . measures that the university takes to represent itself. (Kara, interview with the author, 14 March 2008)

I thought that I had a good understanding of the issues that affect safety and so I was surprised through my research to see that there was such a large range in attitudes about the RHCs [residence hall coordinators]. I think that the major issues now are that the university is so focused on keeping money coming into the university that they mask the issues of safety and then expect students to be in charge of their own safety. (Ella, end-of-semester reflection essay)

[The university] is almost like this corporation. . . . It works like a machine I guess, . . . more as an institution, I guess, as opposed to an event [in my life]. I think that’s kind of how I saw the university before, and now I see it as a stable institution with stable installments that last for a time. They’ve been here long before me and will exist long after me—you know professors, academics, colleges. (Frank, interview with the author, 28 March 2008)

I now recognize that there are these elements of power struggle within the university and within the hierarchy and stuff like that, so it kind of opens your eyes and makes you realize that you have to deal with the university as a political organization as much as an academic institution. (Andy, interview with the author, 9 April 2008)

As students began to consider the university’s interests, they contemplated financial and budgetary considerations, the politics of diverse interest groups on campus, and the university’s need to represent itself in particular ways to the local community and the public at large as well as to prospective students and their parents. While such concerns are daily fare for administrators and many faculty members, they are novel to most undergraduate students. The ethnographic inquiry encouraged students to question what they had previously assumed. Students’ institutional thinking led, at least at first, to increased skepticism about university interests and practices but also resulted in greater appreciation of the challenges universities face and of their own role as students and university stakeholders.

Lynn's new way of seeing Unity and the university colored the way she understood research in other courses in which she was enrolled. For instance, she was able to see that most student research, such as that required for her Sociology 300 senior capstone course, is about the university but rarely recognized as such: "[Everyone in] Soc 300 is studying the university, they are just not really being made aware of it. . . . We are doing these studies but we are never making the link to the university so we don't see it as research of the university. We just see it as this totally separate thing, which is terribly *un-sociological* of us" (interview with the author, 21 March 2008). Indeed, although her peers conducted focus groups, interviews, and surveys with students on campus, they seldom recognized or contemplated the studenthood of their research subjects.

What did the students learn about ethnography? Certainly students came away with some experience using various qualitative research techniques and valued that experience. Nearly every student reported learning the most from their own research experiences. Ellen noted in her final reflection essay, "There are just some things we can't learn [in class] such as: what to take note of while observing, *how* to take note of that, how to conduct an interview . . . those are just things I have to learn as I go." Frank wrote in his essay, "I learned that no matter how much one reads about note taking or interviewing, practice is infinitely more valuable."

I also found that the reflexive nature of ethnographic research increased learners' awareness of their own learning (see also Jiménez n.d.). Students commented on their own learning spontaneously in their field notes as well as in their reflection essays. But what I looked for as evidence of learning ethnography was something more abstract.

Although I do not necessarily subscribe to Harry Wolcott's (2008: 46) insistence that the objective of ethnography is cultural interpretation, I will borrow his distinction between ethnography as a way of looking (i.e., data-producing techniques) at the field and ethnography as a way of seeing (an interpretive perspective that contextualizes the field). With this in mind, some students' seemingly vague responses to the question "What did you learn about ethnography?" are interesting, if inarticulate. Fiona wrote, "Ethnography is not just one thing, it has many aspects" (reflection essay), and Ellen said, "The course has taught me to look at my own environment differently and question why things are the way they are . . . it gave me an ethnographer's perspective" (interview with the author, 15 March 2008). What is interesting is that these students did not limit their responses about ethnography to a list of techniques.

I take as evidence of ethnographic thinking how student questions changed throughout their projects. Both Stacey and Lynn started with rather empirical questions: Stacey wanted to know whether ISU was an environmentally responsible organization, and Lynn wanted to describe a student club. Their later questions reflect greater attention to meaning and social context: Stacey began to distinguish between various uses of green discourses and about different stakeholders' expectations (potential students, a faculty member and activist, administrators). She also began to make a distinction between sustainability-related activities and a sustainability movement. Lynn started out wanting to document the "sense of belonging" in a community. Later she began to consider how, organizationally, that belonging was created, and she became self-conscious about her own use of *belonging* and its relationship to related discourses of student involvement. The students began asking ethnographic questions.

Missing the University Link and the Challenges of Student Research

Among the sampled students, two conducted projects that had many merits but failed to make a "university link"; that is, they were not successful as studies of the university. (Failing to make the university link did not mean failing the course, since students were evaluated on a number of criteria and assignments throughout the semester.) A consideration of what these two projects lacked is instructive because it highlights the specificity of the institutional approach. In addition, a reflection on the challenges that all students faced reveals the benefits and difficulties specific to institutional research and those that accompany any attempt to conduct ethnographic research in the time constraints of a semester.

Barbara decided to investigate why students choose the majors they do. She assumed that a person's interests and talents were important, and she imagined that students would be strongly influenced by their parents' opinions on the topic. I agreed that all these were important factors to consider but also encouraged her to consider a piece of information that she (like most students) was until then less familiar with — that departments track the numbers of their majors and may implement policies and procedures aimed at increasing or restricting that number. In light of this, we agreed that academic advisers probably hold key positions in helping students decide on majors and as gatekeepers or recruiters for their respective departments. Barbara decided to interview a number of advisers to ask them how they balance students' and departments' interests. Barbara's initial question was interesting, but it conformed to an American cultural bias that prioritizes the personal

decision making and individual choices at the expense of understanding the structural forces at work in our lives. The second question, which I helped Barbara develop, was meant to help her see forces beyond individual aptitudes and preferences.

Barbara found data on national trends in majors, and she interviewed several academic advisers. Advisers denied explicitly routing students into or away from majors but admitted that they must fill certain courses lest those be dropped from the schedule and confirmed that they encouraged undecided students to choose majors for which they had already accumulated a substantial number of credit hours. Barbara did little with this information, however, and did not develop an awareness of the indirect ways that advisers (according to her own data) and institutional efforts can influence which majors students choose. She took the first important steps at considering external economic and institutional context for these personal decisions but did not go further into the specific ways in which those forces work upon students. In the end, she said she was much more aware of the resources that the university offers students to help them decide upon a career and a major course of study, and her recommendation to the university was to advertise these resources more widely.

Frank also failed to make the university connection. He decided to document an informal group of student Capture the Flag enthusiasts. His final paper was a rich description of a campus microculture replete with discussion of the group's specialized vocabulary and an ethno-semantic classification of game strategies. It was written largely based on his own understanding of the game and the social group but also from ad hoc conversations with his teammates. Despite the wealth of ethnographic detail, the project failed as an analysis of the university even though Frank could have used his data to reflect on the university in myriad ways (though less obviously than those students who chose to study formal university organizations). He could have examined this informal group in the context of the university's persistent urging that students "get involved." He might have examined how this student network results from or contributes to other campus networks. In his project, however, the university remained the unconsidered background to the game activities. Statements in his interview and reflection papers show that he "got" the idea of the university, but his final paper was a descriptive essay largely about the game itself and his own experience. Frank was well aware of the limitations of his final product. Part of the challenge of the course for Frank was the independent nature of the work and the requirement to write

progressively throughout the semester; he wrote most of his paper at the end of the course. In addition, exploring the significance of the game for students and the university required that Frank go beyond the knowledge he already possessed and could access via the perspective of his peers only — something he was unable or unwilling to do for my course that semester.

Taking on a self-managed research project over the course of a semester was universally challenging for the students. All students in the sample reported that they had trouble keeping up with assignments and finding enough time to dedicate to research activities. Both highly motivated students who worked far beyond the requirements of the course and those who admitted they completed much less work toward their project expressed this sentiment. The unanimity of responses among very different students suggests that something beyond the sheer length of reading and writing assignments influenced students' perception of the course.

I believe that the format of the course, in which written assignments are due at each twice-weekly class period and previous writing is continually revisited and revised, disrupted students' usual "night before" paper-writing habits, a pattern that one student, Kara, humorously called her "procrastination style" of learning. Students were unaccustomed to the piecemeal, step-by-step process of constructing and writing a research paper. Many students reported that this course was "different" because most assignments were related to students' own projects; they could not easily skip assignments or "cram" before deadlines, as students reported that they often do. Stacey noted in her reflection essay, "This course is different . . . I think I have gotten through my entire school years by by-passing much of the work and still getting A's," and in his essay Frank echoed, "Usually I manage, even at the 300-level to 'wing it' . . . [but this class] is moving incredibly quickly and I've barely caught up with my work and reading, and then I'm behind again." If students complained that the course was "too much work," they also stressed that the research projects were the most rewarding aspect of the course.

Students learn best when they are required to solve problems, practice new skills, and use new information constructively, rather than sit passively in lectures. Thus, some faculty have designed "active learning" strategies for the college classroom (Meyers and Jones 1993), and universities across the nation have been encouraged to make inquiry-based learning the standard for undergraduate education (Boyer Commission 1998), yet neither has become typical classroom practice. Larry summarizes below the key benefits and challenges of this kind of research-based course — the student work is to some

extent independent, requires time-management skills, and demands constant revision and reflection—but he notes that this is *not* how most of his college courses are organized.

If I were to tell another student about the course [I would say]: you are going to find a topic about the university, focus on it, and then you are going to have to go about researching that topic on your own. . . . And most of all you are going to have to keep up to date with it on the online database, which is going to be the hardest part if you're anything like me. But, I think that the course gives the student the opportunity to try to conduct research for the first time and kind of figure out what the process of conducting research consists of and how difficult it really is, but as well as how obtainable it is. . . . I think it is important to let [future students] know that it is *unlike most classes they take*, and you really get a chance to relate to your work. You know, you get to research something that you are interested in and it is *constantly a reflection on that process*. (interview with the author, 19 March 2008; emphasis added)

Undoubtedly a reason that more courses are not research based is that accompanying even a small group of students through individual research projects is time consuming and unpredictable and therefore much harder for faculty to manage within their own workloads.

A second challenge for all students related to the nature of institutional research. Studying up the university hierarchy is a tall order for the novice ethnographer. Stacey noted that the idea of contacting and interviewing ISU staff “terrified me. . . . during my project I always had the feeling that I know so little . . . and I’m so ineloquent when I have to talk to people, especially [those] in higher positions” (22 March 2008 interview). I eased this for students by making introductions between students and faculty and staff, but this did not entirely mitigate the problem. Yet the critical thinking involved in understanding and exploring a complex institution is perhaps the most valuable of lifelong learning skills that students could take away from the course. The flip side was that students were excited to be conducting “real” research that an audience outside the course (other members of the university community) might care about. Though their results were preliminary, all students believed they had something valuable to say about and *to* the university. Six students from the course participated in a symposium one semester after the course to present the results of their research to the university community. At that event, in response to a newspaper journalist’s question, each student passionately argued that student researchers offer insightful perspectives that are otherwise unavailable to the university.

Conclusion

Ethnography is more than a set of methods; it is a “way of seeing” (Wolcott 2008). When students undertake the kind of institutional ethnography described here, their commonsense notion of the university as a *place* broadens into an understanding of universities as complex enduring institutions with diverse, and sometimes competing, interests and objectives. The university culture that students come to know is revealed in specific institutional discourses and practices; it does not adhere to any locale or group. Certainly, the approach used here can be applied to ethnographic investigations of other institutions.

Teaching students to investigate and think critically about the university is one way faculty can prepare them to be engaged and critical stakeholders in the institutions that will organize their lives long after they leave campus. Universities, likewise, can become more responsive and responsible organizations by listening carefully to their own students’ inquiries and insights.

Notes

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1. EU’s online collection, housed within the Illinois Digital Environment for Access for Learning and Scholarship, can be found at www.ideals.illinois.edu/handle/2142/755.
2. Sociologist Michael Burawoy’s extended case method (1991: 9) uses participant observation to reconstruct existing sociological theories by searching for ethnographic phenomena that are anomalous or unexplained by macrotheories. Perhaps more appropriate to graduate students, this productive strategy begins with theory and requires that students become versed in theories relevant to the field site and problem. This may be too much to ask of beginning students and instructors with twenty to thirty students in their course to attend to.
3. The eleven participants represented the composition of the class in terms of majors, class ranking, and final course grade: five were sociology majors and six anthropology majors; seven participants were seniors and four juniors.

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