

Ethnography of the University
Cross-Campus Initiative
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

Overview

The Ethnography of the University (EOTU) initiative sponsors undergraduate research on the university and archives it in web-accessible form for the UIUC community. EOTU also functions as a learning group for students, staff, and faculty interested in what it means to conduct research on universities as institutions.

EOTU encourages students to interact with existing university narratives through qualitative research. Namely, by engaging the multiple stories that universities tell themselves and others, student researchers can understand the implications of their findings. From this perspective, EOTU appreciates that universities and colleges—as institutions, organizations, maps, and histories—are composites of diverse prose, statistical, and visual narratives that communicate complex and often conflicting institutional values, commitments, and identities. EOTU thus directs students' attention to these complex and even conflicting narratives about the university. EOTU ethnographic research includes face-to-face participant observation and interviews, as well as historical, discursive, visual, numerical, and web-based analyses.

EOTU is foremost committed to research *on* the University of Illinois as a particular institution of higher education with a particular history and a specific set of contemporary social relations. We distinguish research *on* the university from research *in* or *at* the university so as to underscore our interest in nesting student research within the university as an institution at a particular historical moment. In this way, students are asked to connect the university to a broad array of social and political institutions as well as national and global social forces. As a pedagogical initiative, EOTU heeds the call to infuse research into the undergraduate curriculum, a call issued by numerous higher education associations, postsecondary education policy centers, charitable foundations, and the higher education press. Foundational to EOTU is the understanding that students are at once learners and producers of knowledge. They produce knowledge with the understanding that their research could become the basis for future student inquiry. We understand students as institutional persons who are both invested in and products of the organizations in which they participate. We hope this perception will enable students to see the value of the knowledge they produce and will energize their contributions to an enduring university repository.

EOTU is fast becoming a living archive of student ethnographic research on the university. The Inquiry Page, a dynamic virtual community developed at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, currently houses students' ethnographies. The Inquiry Page offers a collaborative environment in which inquiry-based education can be discussed, resources and experiences shared, and innovative approaches explored. Both the processes and products of research are archived in readily accessible form, and are thereby made available to later generations of students who will build on the work of their predecessors.

In its short life, the EOTU initiative has taken many unanticipated and salutary turns, prompted often by the interest of various campus units. For example, we have come to realize the relevance of EOTU to the assessment of student learning. Thanks to the interest of campus proponents of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL), we recognize that the EOTU archive can be viewed as an enduring portfolio that showcases both the processes and products of student learning. Other campus units are also tapping EOTU's ability to coordinate student documentation of activities across campus. Recently, the Office of the Chancellor commissioned EOTU to conduct an ethnographic study of the 2003-04 *Brown v. Board of Education* Jubilee Commemoration on our campus, and we are currently meeting with other groups on campus who are interested in having EOTU students conduct research on their activities. This is a very exciting direction for EOTU, one that will certainly help students think of themselves as important university citizens with skills that are in demand and can make a difference.

Finally, as EOTU progresses, we have come to see that it both joins and promotes a critical campus commitment, that of self-examination. Just as EOTU makes the intricate process of student research available to public scrutiny, so does EOTU make university programs, units, and constituencies subject to examination, consideration, and debate. We have grown increasingly committed to institutional self-examination as an ongoing venture in which the university's primary consumers—its undergraduates—participate at the heart of its research mission.

Cross-Campus Aspects of Initiative

In Fall 2003, EOTU moved into the undergraduate classroom with six affiliated courses: four sections of first-year Rhetoric, one upper-level course in English, and one special topics course in Anthropology. In one way or another, all of the courses involve students in ethnographic research and writing. The Rhetoric classes focus on developing research and writing skills just as all Rhetoric classes do, but the subject matter is the university as an institution. The English course, which enrolls prospective secondary-level language arts teachers, focuses students' attention on the social functions of literacy in and out of the institution. In contrast to the narrowly defined projects in the Rhetoric and English classes, advanced undergraduates in the Anthropology class pursue a broad range of ethnographic research projects on the university.

At this early stage in EOTU's development, several units have worked to enhance the resources available to EOTU-affiliated student researchers. Faculty in the University Library and students in the Graduate School of Library and Information Science (GSLIS) created a website addressing the question, "Where is the University in the University Library?" (see door.library.uiuc.edu/rex/instruction/eotuproject/index.htm). Also, faculty and graduate students in GSLIS adapted their collaborative, web-based research instrument, the Inquiry Page, to foster an environment not only for student research but also for reflection upon it. This environment allows student researchers to share and comment on work in a variety of EOTU-affiliated courses (see www.inquiry.uiuc.edu and below for more information on the Inquiry Page.)

Rationale

EOTU's agenda is in part a response to the perception that major public universities' investment in undergraduate teaching has declined as their commitment to research has increased.

In 1998, the Boyer Commission on Educating Undergraduates in the Research University recommended significant reforms aimed at aligning the teaching and research missions of institutions such as UIUC. Perhaps the commission's most compelling recommendation was that undergraduates should be drawn into campus research activities so as to introduce them to the processes of inquiry entailed in the production of new knowledge. Three years after its initial report, the Boyer Commission found that the move to research-based teaching in undergraduate humanities and social science classes had lagged behind the laboratory sciences and engineering.

Complementing the Boyer Commission's assessment of curricular matters are the findings of a sustained study of the undergraduate experience conducted by the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) at Indiana University. NSSE results indicate that a challenging curriculum featuring active learning and enriched faculty-student interaction greatly enhances students' sense of engagement in college life. Engaged students arguably learn more and learn better—and, in the context of research universities, cultivate a life-long habit of critical inquiry that is as important to responsible citizenship as it is to career success.

For its part, EOTU directly addresses the Boyer Commission's finding that research-based learning has yet to flourish in the humanities and social sciences. It does so by advancing specific research-based learning strategies that are intended to heighten student engagement with learning. Furthermore, while we are immediately concerned with securing EOTU across UIUC's undergraduate curriculum, we intend to develop the project so that its essential elements are readily adaptable to a range of higher education environments.

EOTU Projects

Although participants are free to tailor EOTU student research in any number of ways, EOTU has delineated six areas of substantive inquiry to which participants and their students may contribute. These projects offer already developed research problems for which inquiry resources have already been culled.

Globalization and the University. This project examines the influence of globalization on the university and the university's place in a burgeoning world market for higher education. What impact, for example, do the half-million foreign students studying in the United States have on the nation's universities? At the same time, this project considers domestic students' engagement with international education, including foreign language study and study abroad. How will the globalization of the university affect U.S. undergraduates' much-lamented ambivalence about study extending beyond the nation's borders?

Learning Communities. Both in and beyond educational institutions, people forge social ties that allow them to learn more effectively and with greater results. Through these collaborations—be they in workplaces, sports clubs, or on the Web—people construct something more powerful and meaningful than they would have alone. Research in this project aims to

document and learn from these communities and in so doing to consider how we might better foster collaborative learning.

Race and the University. Whether spoken of in the context of “diversity” or “multiculturalism,” race is at the heart of the American university—its history, its contemporary challenges, and its futures. This project examines ways in which the U.S. university and the American college experience are indelibly racialized. In particular, this project examines longstanding U.S. debates and decisions on affirmative action.

Student Writing. Students write their way through the undergraduate curriculum, not only to demonstrate what they know about a subject, but also to rehearse and demonstrate disciplinary modes of knowing and expression. This project examines how students use writing to make sense of the university’s research mission as they themselves engage in academic inquiry. It also investigates students’ extracurricular writing and attempts to discern how students compose a coherent “writing life” that draws from their various identities during their undergraduate years.

Technology and Student Life. The lives of U.S. students are day by day becoming more enmeshed in digital technologies, from e-mail to Internet messaging, and from web-logs to cellular phones. Less clear, however, are the meanings and impact of these technologies on students’ social lives, learning, and group formation. This project appreciates that the media ecology of student life is transforming quickly. Technology in student life thus offers a rich ethnographic site

The University and the Community. EOTU appreciates that the boundaries between the university, the local community, and the wider world are porous. Many campus units and constituencies interact with the community and world in diverse ways, from service programs to research projects. EOTU is interested in documenting this interaction in the interest of thinking about how more truly collaborative university-community projects might be developed.

University Archival Practices. This project appreciates that university units and constituencies are archivists: they make decisions about the records and memories they preserve, be they students’ scrap books or web logs; departments’ faculty meeting notes; or administrators’ e-mail correspondence. This project is also interested in the vision and decision-making of those diverse campus units charged with archiving the university, including the University Archives, the Student Life and Culture Archive, and an emerging project to establish an electronic institutional repository. The durable memory of a university—its digital and print records—offers a telling window on university identities and values.

Institutional Context

The infrastructural and intellectual resources of UIUC will enable us to sustain EOTU over time. In terms of information infrastructure, the campus has long been on the technological cutting edge. UIUC is the cradle of the Netscape browser and the Eudora e-mail application, and in 1998 *Yahoo! Internet Life* named it the “most wired” public university campus in the United States. Most important for EOTU, however, is the enormous intellectual energy available at the interface between technology and the humanities at the university. EOTU will draw liberally on resources and expertise already established at this interface:

- *The Illinois Program for Research in the Humanities*. Founded in 1997, the program promotes interdisciplinary study in the humanities, arts, and social sciences.
- *The Center for Democracy in a Multiracial Society*. Initiated in 2002 as a Chancellor's cross-campus initiative, center affiliates examine how multiracial democracy is experienced in a variety of contexts, with a special focus on the university.
- *The Student Life and Culture Archival Program*. The program collects, preserves, and makes available materials documenting student involvement in fraternities, sororities, student government, religious associations, publications, social events, athletics, and other activities that contribute to students' experiences in higher education. No other university in the United States has such a collection.
- *The University Library*. The Library provides coordinated support for EOTU projects through its "Where Is the University in the University Library" webpage.
- *Campus Information Technologies and Educational Services (CITES)*. CITES coordinates the integration of information and educational technologies into academic life. Free regular consulting and competitive intensive support are available for campus initiatives.
- *Applied Technologies for Learning in the Arts and Sciences (ATLAS)*. ATLAS provides consulting on educational technologies and maintains state-of-the-art instructional spaces for the departments and instructors in the Liberal Arts and Sciences.

EOTU incorporates two web-based applications that were developed by colleagues on the UIUC campus:

- *The Inquiry Page*. A dynamic virtual community, the Inquiry Page offers a collaborative environment in which inquiry-based education can be discussed, resources and experiences shared, and innovative approaches explored. Both the processes and products of research are archived in readily accessible form, and are thereby made available to later generations of students who will build on the work of their predecessors.
- *Inquiring Knowledge Networks on the Web (IKNOW)*. IKNOW is a web-based application that assists communities—classes, workgroups, and organizations—in managing their knowledge assets. By surveying a community's members and searching its web pages, IKNOW answers the questions: who knows who? who knows what? who knows who knows who? who knows who knows what?

Finally, EOTU's success to date owes much to the initial investment of UIUC's Center for Advanced Study (CAS). CAS funding sustained a Fall 2002 seminar series that each week brought together faculty and graduate fellows from the departments of Anthropology, English, History, Psychology, Sociology, and Speech Communication; administrators from the offices of the Vice Chancellor for Research, the Provost and Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs, the

Dean of Students, and Academic Policy Analysis; and a psychologist from the Counseling Center.

The EOTU Working Group

In its first year, the EOTU Working Group—a group of faculty, students, and administrators interested in envisioning and directing the project—asked broadly what it would mean to study any university ethnographically. We devoted sessions to thinking about how to execute EOTU as a working project at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. In conjunction with the EOTU Working Group Meetings, in Fall 2002, visitors from off-campus participated in a lecture series, *The Future of the University: Knowledge, Networks, Pedagogy*. We emerged from our 2002-03 activities with an understanding of our approach to the university—as a composite of prose, numerical, visual, and network narratives—and with a plan for the 2003-04 pilot phase of EOTU. See www.eotu.uiuc.edu/events/2002-03events.htm for an overview of the year.

Now in its second year, the EOTU Working Group is devoting its meetings to a study of *Globalization and the University*. Specifically, we are considering four issues: (1) international education in U.S. universities; (2) the effects of the global higher education market on U.S. universities; (3) the effects of international students on U.S. universities; and (4) study abroad of U.S. university students.

Globalization and the University continues the commitment of EOTU to foster student research that is embedded in larger institutional, political-economic, and representational contexts. *Globalization and the University* will: (1) train Working Group participants—many of whom will teach EOTU-affiliated courses—in this area; (2) prepare EOTU organizers to be able to include *Globalization and the University* as a session in the Summer 2004 EOTU Summer Institute (which will train a second generation of faculty to teach EOTU-related courses); and (3) result in a *Globalization and the University* gateway page on the EOTU website for teachers and students (i.e., an informational clearinghouse that will foster inquiry-based student research that is institutionally and globally embedded). EOTU appreciates that each of these themes can be addressed in student ethnographic research on the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. We are confident that our activities this year will help us to think about how these themes can be productively addressed and to what end (see www.eotu.uiuc.edu/events/2003-04global.htm).

Into the near future, EOTU will each year take up an EOTU project for sustained analysis, as we are this year with *Globalization and the university* (see www.eotu.uiuc.edu/pedagogy/projects.htm on the projects). We envision that EOTU projects will become clusters of substantive research activity. While not all EOTU-affiliated courses and students will engage these concerns, the projects offer faculty and students a gateway to research on the university. The gateway will provide resources that make it easy for students to build upon existing data and research questions. In 2004-05, EOTU will devote its activities to *Race and the University*.

Summer Institute

The 2004 EOTU Summer Institute will facilitate cross-campus application of instructional approaches and materials developed during EOTU's 2003-04 pilot phase. Most of

the presenters who will lead sessions during the institute participated in the 2002-03 initiative and have continued to attend Working Group seminars in 2003-04. The Summer Institute's aim is to prepare a second generation of faculty from diverse campus units to participate in EOTU. These faculty members will commit to teaching at least one EOTU-affiliated class during the 2004-05 academic year.

The Summer Institute will be organized around four activities: (1) reading, inquiry, and discussion centered on the idea of the university as narrative; (2) introduction and analysis of contemporary and historical narratives about UIUC in particular and higher education more generally; (3) a critical and constructive review of EOTU's 2003-04 pilot phase; and (4) hands-on training in the web-based applications and other technologies upon which EOTU relies.