

UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS
AT URBANA - CHAMPAIGN

Ethnography of the University
Cross-Campus Initiative
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Ethnography of the University (EOTU) Launches EOTU Live

What is a research university? Does more learning go on in the dorms or in the classroom? Are men and women treated differently? What impact do international students have on university life? What is the impact of athletics on a university's mission?

These are the questions that jump from the screen at EOTU Live (www.eotu.uiuc.edu/live/intro.htm). Answers to these questions emerge from this ethnography-based website straight from the mouths of students, staff, and faculty. Accomplished visual and aural artist Anna Callahan created the site for Ethnography of the University (EOTU), a cross-campus initiative at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign (UIUC) that fosters ethnographic research on the university by undergraduates, graduate students, and faculty (see www.eotu.uiuc.edu). Callahan's site offers 173 pages and 3-1/2 hours of audio-taped interviews, inviting the browser to listen in on the contemporary American research university. Callahan, a recent UIUC MFA graduate, creates work that represents the lives of various communities, including projects featured recently in *Harper's Magazine* and on the front page of the *Chicago Tribune* arts section.

EOTU Live draws on ethnographic research done by undergraduate students at UIUC on questions like "What is the University?" and captures beautifully what it is to represent, dissect,

and discuss university life. Callahan organized the student-generated materials around themes of people's activities at universities: connecting, playing, beginning, examining, mapping, residing, learning, and working. A click on any of these action verbs takes the visitor to a colorful portal whose figures are the gateway to an assemblage of faculty, staff, students and community voices and student research projects. In visual and audio form, these voices answer questions like "The relationships of the university to the community is. . .," "To pay for school I. . .," and "Diversity on campus is. . . ." Art, information, and the process of inquiry meet at EOTU Live. The site's colorful visuals and live voices make it hard for visitors to leave, compelling them to linger among sounds and images that bring the university to life.

Callahan's previous work attracted the attention of the EOTU organizers because of the skillful and beautiful way in which she both captures local knowledge and pushes audiences to reflect on diverse views, values, and daily lives. Callahan's commitment to the power of local stories to make and transform community resonated perfectly with EOTU's cardinal commitments to a new way of thinking about the university and its undergraduate students.

The result is a very different gateway to the University of Illinois, one that departs from the usual ways of promoting the institution as a singular, coherent entity. EOTU Live instead offers a complex, colorful, chatty, and even argumentative entrée to the voices of students, professors, staff, administrators, community members, and web viewers from far beyond.

About Anna Callahan

Anna Callahan's work on EOTU Live takes student inquiry out of the traditional research paper and makes it accessible to a wide audience, from high school students contemplating attending a research university, to long-time members of the university community, and to professionals contemplating innovations in pedagogical methods. The project continues

Callahan's previous work as a community-based artist. She has created an array of visual and aural productions that capture the knowledge that communities accumulate and put to work in the everyday lives of their members.

In 2002, Callahan completed an audio website, "Thoughts and Feelings in Rockville, UT, Rockaway, NJ, and Rockmart GA, 2002." This site depicts the remarkable similarities of responses made by people in these very different locations to questions related to their fears, worries, hopes, and dreams for the future. Also in 2002, Callahan developed "On the Bus: An Art Project Intended to Spark Interest in Those around You." She rode the bus lines in Champaign-Urbana from beginning to end and interviewed a diverse group of riders. She asked them two questions: "What are you looking forward to?" and "What are you not to looking forward to?" The recorded conversations became the basis for installations on buses that mapped the routes with quotations from riders. Audio recordings of these interviews were made available at a kiosk in the central bus/rail terminal and became a way for users to sample the diversity of the community and appreciate the dynamics of their lives.

In 2003, Callahan created *The Danville Community Encyclopedia*. Beginning with the assumption that libraries are places "where members of a community can come to acquire knowledge" and believing that libraries can be places where people can deposit knowledge as well, Callahan set out to create an installation that represented what people in the Danville, Illinois community know. She placed advertisements in the local paper, scheduled interview times, and invited people to come to the library to share their understandings of the world. The book and CD that resulted showcase the rich knowledge of people in Danville. Entries range from Durvesh Abbobakar's contribution on "India," Maher Bages' on "Iraq," Jackie McDonald's on "parenting," Gary A. Jones' on "bait," Chuck Brubaker's on "boilers," Ian M. Nelk's on

“predestination,” and Tedra Johnson’s on “Frederick Douglass.” The encyclopedia and the accompanying CD have been installed in the Danville, Illinois library and have received national attention. *Harper’s Magazine* reprinted a selection from the encyclopedia in its February 2004 issue.

About EOTU

EOTU is a pedagogical project that encourages students to produce knowledge for students, staff, administrators, and people in the Champaign-Urbana community; this knowledge then becomes a starting point for the inquiry of future generations of students. Student research is archived and publicly accessible for the UIUC community and beyond so that students can be a critical source of university self-evaluation. EOTU also functions as a learning group for students, staff, and faculty interested in what it means to conduct research on universities as institutions in local, state, national, and global contexts. EOTU was planned by a group of faculty, staff, administrators, graduate, and undergraduate students in the 2002-03 academic year and launched in the classroom in Fall 2003. EOTU Live draws from the student research and writing from this first generation of EOTU courses in the disciplines of Anthropology and English.

Over the 2004-05 academic year, EOTU will take a particular interest in the exploration of race and the university. In this venture EOTU joins another Cross-Campus Initiative, the Center on Democracy in a Multiracial Society (CDMS). Inspired by the fruits of the partnership with Anna Callahan, EOTU and CDMS will issue a request for proposals for a 2005 EOTU artist-in-residence to focus on race and the university. So much of the university legacy is written words, pages and pages of printed and increasingly on-line text and EOTU is committed to leaving other traces like EOTU Live, visually beautiful ones that reach out to the senses, and

perhaps speak to larger audiences. EOTU co-organizers Nancy Abelman (Anthropology and East Asian Languages and Cultures), William Kelleher (Anthropology), and Peter Mortensen (English) believe that EOTU Live is much more than a snapshot of EOTU: it is an aesthetic that offers another way of looking and listening. They are committed to continued work with visual artists who will help EOTU and its student researchers see the university differently, and, in so doing, transform the university.

Project URL: www.eotu.uiuc.edu/live/intro.htm

Artist URL: www.anna-callahan.com

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