An Anthropologist in the Library

The U. of Rochester takes a close look at students in the stacks

By SCOTT CARLSON

Put this story down for a moment and take a look at the undergraduates around your desk, outside your office, or out on the quad. Do you know what makes them tick? Where and how they study, the ways they spend each hour of the day, the steps they go through when writing their papers? Or are they enigmas?

Perhaps, to get some clues, you've read books about the so-called Net Generation, which brand them all as technophiles, gamers, and multitaskers. Or you might see them as younger versions of yourself during your college years — more plugged in, of course, but essentially the same.

You're probably wrong.

Now consider some advice from someone who has spent the past couple of years sitting with undergraduates in dorm rooms, examining the contents of their book bags, and interviewing them at length. "If you have been making a bunch of assumptions based on out-of-date information," says Nancy Fried Foster, an anthropologist at the University of Rochester, "maybe it's time to ask some people some questions."

A few years ago, Ms. Foster was hired by Rochester's library to study undergraduates, to help shed light on how they do their research and write papers, and how they spend their days. The results of the study, which will be published in a book due out next month from the Association of College and Research Libraries, helped guide a library renovation, influenced a Web-site redesign, led to changes in the way the library markets itself to students, and, in some
cases, completely changed the image of undergraduates in the eyes of Rochester librarians.

"This has forced us all to abandon our preconceptions of what college is like now," says Susan Gibbons, an associate dean at Rochester's library who helped lead the study, which has gained some attention from institutions around the world. Other libraries, including ones as near as Syracuse University and as far away as the University of Queensland, in Australia, are considering hiring anthropologists to conduct similar studies.

When Ms. Foster, Ms. Gibbons, and other librarians set out to study undergraduates, they came up with a guiding question for their research: "What happens when a professor assigns a paper to a student?"

"It's a black box, and we wanted to look into that box," Ms. Gibbons says. "Beyond that we had no agenda."

Armed with munchies and $5 bills as enticements, they went out to find students who would tell them about life as an undergrad.

**One Size May Not Fit All**

Ms. Gibbons and Ms. Foster emphasize that an anthropological study of students is neither difficult nor expensive. They did it on a shoestring — Ms. Foster's salary (which they won't divulge), plus small change to buy office supplies and cookies, chips, and soda to bribe students to participate. About a third of the library's staff members volunteered to help, and to write chapters of the book.

But there is no shortcut for other institutions; most colleges could not just apply the Rochester study's findings to their own students.

"You wouldn't want to superimpose the findings from a private, competitive, residential university like Rochester onto the student body of, say, a community college," Ms. Gibbons says.

The Rochester findings confirmed some of the researchers' assumptions about undergraduates. And they shattered others.
For example, most people believe that the Net Generation is hard-wired for technology — that they understand the latest technology intuitively, and that they are enthusiastic users of it. But the study at Rochester paints a different picture.

"There is not a big technophile-technophobe division" between students and faculty members, Ms. Foster says. "There are still significant numbers of students who are completely inept with technology."

"The literature will say that Net Generation students are multitaskers, and that they always want to be online," Ms. Gibbons adds. "But what we were seeing from some of our students is that they come to the library to unplug, to get offline. They still need time for concentration and to focus intensively on something."

Parents Hover, Students Cling

By now, most administrators in college have noticed the phenomenon of "helicopter parents," and the ubiquity of mobile communications means that students can check in with Mom or Dad at any time. But Ms. Foster, Ms. Gibbons, and the other librarians at Rochester never realized how often their students are in contact with parents until they started asking about the paper-writing process. They found that soon after getting a paper assignment, many students called their parents to ask what they should write about. And as the students were researching and writing their papers, they were checking in with their parents to talk about the paper or even asking parents to edit their work.

"We were shocked to find that out," Ms. Foster says. "One can only assume that parents were editing their papers in high school. It wouldn't have just started now."

Before doing the study, some librarians thought that students worked late at night and up to the last minute because they were procrastinators. But the study showed that many students were compulsive overachievers, that their days were heavily scheduled, and that their only free time was late at night, when they often began their homework — and when librarians saw them coming into the
building.

A segment of the study asked students to map their movements across the campus throughout a single day. One student, described as representative of his peers, began his day at 8:30 a.m. and covered 2.5 miles over the next 16 hours. He ate a prepackaged meal at 3 p.m. and dinner at 12:30 a.m. the next day.

"The expectations for themselves are very, very high — I think way too high," Ms. Gibbons says. "They have been told if you work hard, you will succeed. And they are killing themselves."

Not Simply Academic

The driving force behind the study isn't simply curiosity about undergraduates. Ms. Gibbons and Ms. Foster hope to apply what they have learned.

This is a type of consumer research, borrowed from the corporate world. Several years ago, Rochester was contemplating hiring a designer to rework some of its Web sites when David Lindahl, a computer scientist who had just arrived at Rochester's library from the Xerox Palo Alto Research Center, offered a suggestion: Why not hire someone to study customers and their work environments, as Xerox had when he worked there?

At the time, there was no money within the library to hire an anthropologist, so Ms. Gibbons applied for a grant from the Institute of Museum and Library Services. Ms. Foster, who was trained at Columbia University and had done traditional anthropological work in the Brazilian rainforest, arrived at Rochester soon after that. She says she has always had an interest in applied anthropology, the process of taking the methods of anthropology and using them in consumer studies and product design, among other areas.

Her work at Rochester started with a study of faculty members and how they might use an institutional repository of scholarly work. In the process, the librarians learned things about how professors do their work, how they perceive the library, and how they might work more closely with librarians.
By the time that study ended, library administrators decided they had to hire Ms. Foster, and they made room in the library budget to bring her on.

**Like Kindergarten**

Some of the methods for gathering information might seem unusual, almost like projects out of elementary school. For example, students were handed big sheets of cardboard and asked to map out the paper-writing process, drawing themselves as stick figures. Researchers also gave students cardboard, construction paper, markers, and glue, and asked them to design their ideal portable device — something that had every tool or feature they would ever need.

Other segments of the research might resemble traditional observational methods. The researchers visited dorm rooms, video cameras in hand, and recorded the ways that students worked on their computers, the things they were working on, the games they were playing, or the conversations they had online. They gave students disposable cameras and asked them to shoot pictures of the tools they use for writing assignments and the things they always carry with them. (Laptops were notably absent from those pictures — they are too cumbersome, students told the researchers.)

The study changed the way the library markets itself to students. The library was once merely a stop on the freshman-orientation tour. Now, after seeing how involved moms and dads are in homework, the library holds a breakfast for parents during orientation. "We can see from the drawings that they are so influential in the students' lives, and the students aren't ready to hear from us," Ms. Gibbons says. Parents should leave with the message that experts in the library can help students with research.

Pictures of subject specialists were added to course pages, to reinforce that message. The library Web site is also being redesigned to reflect what students want — to be able to take search boxes and elements from the library site and import them into a portal page. The library site itself "has to be that one-stop shop that has everything," Ms. Gibbons says. "It should be completely customizable."
The library needs to make other changes that will not be so easy — like synchronizing its hours with the schedules of the students. The library reference desk is open from 9 a.m. to 9 p.m., and the library building is open until 3 a.m. "That's not good enough," Ms. Gibbons says. "They seem to be hunkering down for some hard academic work after 9 at night. When they most need us, we aren't here." But how to deal with that problem isn't easy — no librarians have volunteered to staff the reference desk into the wee hours of the morning.

In fact, the study also showed that students did not really want your average reference desk. "They want this generic staff person who could check out a book, answer a question, fix a computer, and brew a really good latte," Ms. Gibbons says. "We didn't know what to do with that."

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