

The ERIAL Project: Findings, Ideas, and Tools to Advance Your Library

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Paper Summary

The Ethnographic Research in Illinois Academic Libraries (ERIAL) Project was a two-year LSTA research grant awarded to Northeastern Illinois University (NEIU) by the Illinois State Library. Five academic libraries partnered in the endeavor. As an applied research project, the primary goal was to use the research findings to improve library services at each of the participating libraries. Other goals included training the librarians in ethnographic methodologies so that they could pursue additional research projects after the grant's end and creating a practical "how to" guide for any library wishing to pursue a user study on their own. Under the guidance of two full time anthropologists, each library had its own research team investigating their students' experiences using the library, and how the quality of the relationships between faculty, students and librarians impacted that use.

ERIAL enrolled over 700 students, teaching faculty and librarians from the five participating universities in the study: DePaul University, Illinois Wesleyan University (IWU), Northeastern Illinois University (NEIU), the University of Illinois at Chicago (UIC) and the University of Illinois at Springfield (UIS). These campuses are urban and suburban, residential and commuter, public and private, with student populations ranging in size from 2,000 to 26,000 including varied ages, races and ethnicities. The ERIAL project used ethnographic methods, which allowed close observations of students as they searched online for information, looked for books and journals, navigated library spaces

and services, and tried to overcome obstacles. ERIAL employed a mixed methods approach of nine different techniques. In the end, the research teams had a very rich description of students' experiences. The in-depth interviews with teaching faculty and librarians further enhanced each teams' understanding.

There are two perspectives on the ERIAL project which are of interest. Because ERIAL was such a large scale project with diverse partners, those findings which were common to all five libraries were seen by many as representing a national profile. Many students, regardless of the institution, seemed lost at almost every step in searching, retrieving, and comprehending the nature of the information they had found, whether online or in print. The depth of this issue, when combined with other findings, was eye opening and received national attention.

However, equally interesting was the impact the ethnographic study had on some of the participating librarians and their corresponding organizations. Because ethnographic methods are so personal and up-close, the direct observations of users and the expression of their experiences in their own words became a compelling and powerful catalyst for change. Even the smallest ethnographic study can create empathy for the user at many levels of an organization. With this in mind I encourage libraries to utilize the freely available "toolkit" written by the ERIAL anthropologists to guide them in their own ethnographic user study, not just to learn about their users, but to become aware of and committed to meeting their needs.

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