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Review of Studying Students: A Second Look

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This book, *Studying Students: A Second Look*, edited by Nancy Fried Foster (Chicago: ACRL, 2013) is a follow-up to a 2007 publication, *Studying Students: The Undergraduate Research Project at the University of Rochester* that demonstrates once again the benefits of conducting ethnographic studies when designing academic library spaces and services. This text covers a range of topics primarily focused on the undergraduate population with some of the chapters replicating and updating studies presented in the first work while others focus on new questions that arose over the past decade.

The book consists of eleven chapters. The introductory chapter, authored by Nancy Fried Foster, provides an overview of the publication and provides the overall context for pursuing follow-up studies. Each of the nine chapters examines a different project or study and includes useful notes and references. The final chapter explores the implications of these studies and offers ideas for future projects.

Methods that were used in the original volume, such as photo elicitation and retrospective interviews, appear throughout this text often as updated versions. Judi Briden and Saranda George revised a photo elicitation study in “Picture My Work.” They included many of the original questions, but this time with greater emphasis on how students use library and campus spaces. In “Learning the Ropes,” the authors used student photo interviews as well as resident and academic advisor interviews to explore how students mature socially, emotionally, physically, and academically throughout their college careers. In “Understanding How Undergraduates Work,” Saranda George and Nancy Fried Foster observed the changes in student work practices along with the technology shifts on the campus which led them to conduct this restudy on how undergraduates complete assignments. These chapters all note that students are most successful when they make connections, whether it is with a research topic, with their peers, or the campus community.

Solomon Blaylock and Cynthia Carlton tackled technology use by undergraduate students through interviews with students and faculty, design workshops, and offer an analysis of the results from a university IT survey. Participants in the design workshop developed a mockup of an application for the library which focused on support for study groups highlighting the role these groups play in students’ academic lives. Another chapter, “Study Groups in the Libraries: Exponential Benefits,” sought to understand how study groups form and how the groups selected meeting spaces. By interviewing study groups, the authors were better able to understand flexible space needs in the library and the challenges of locating group study space on campus.

Nora Dimmock authored one of the few chapters focused on faculty perspectives that explored faculty expectations regarding undergraduate research papers. She found that the faculty responses were aligned by discipline which brings to question the effectiveness of librarians teaching information literacy without regard to a specific discipline. There are two chapters that explore how research is conducted. Helen Anderson and Sarah Sexstone focused on how faculty, librarians, and students locate information on their research topics while also examining faculty and librarian perceptions about how undergraduates locate information. In “Research as Connection,” Nancy Fried Foster compared how librarians approach research during reference interactions with how experts build up knowledge in their field by building connections.

In her chapter, “Designing Academic Libraries with the People Who Work in Them,” Nancy Fried Foster delved into the participatory design process and its application in addressing shifts...
in academic libraries. This is one of the most valuable chapters in the collection as Foster moves beyond space renovation and user behavior to asking larger questions about the future and purpose of academic library buildings.

The main take-away from this volume is that it demonstrates the value of studying library users in order to challenge our assumptions. The chapters are rich with methodologies and, combined with the appendices, the authors provide good starting points for those wishing to undertake similar projects at their own institutions. The sections that replicate or revise previous studies provide reminders that users will change over time and that studying them is an iterative process to be undertaken on a regular basis.

The challenge of this book is that it only studies users at one institution, the University of Rochester’s River Campus Libraries, a private research university, and the results are not universally applicable. While there is much valuable information to be gleaned from this text, readers should be cautioned against applying the finding to their own institutions but instead use the book as a guide to conduct similar studies one’s own institution. This text is primarily focused on undergraduate students with an occasional glimpse of faculty, librarian, or other university staff perceptions which suggests future research possibilities. Overall, this book will be of value at any institution looking to learn more about their users through ethnographic research or participatory design projects.