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Students' Study Habits Prompt Changes at The Ames Library

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BLOOMINGTON, Ill. – Findings from a two-year study of how Illinois college students use academic libraries have resulted in significant changes – physical, operational and strategic – at The Ames Library at Illinois Wesleyan University.

Entitled ERIAL (Ethnographic Research in Illinois Academic Libraries), the study at Illinois Wesleyan and four other higher education institutions in the state examined how students view and use their campus libraries.

One of the most striking results of the study was the near-invisibility of librarians within students' academic worldview, according to Associate Professor and Academic Outreach Librarian Lynda Duke, Illinois Wesleyan's principal investigator on the project.

"I assume librarians are busy doing library stuff," one sophomore said during the ERIAL study's data collection.

Librarians have engaged the teaching faculty at Wesleyan to change that perception, and results are encouraging. For example, in the 2007-2008 academic year (prior to the ERIAL Project), Wesleyan librarians provided 85 instruction sessions on how to conduct academic research for 57 teaching faculty, whose classes reached 1,266 students, according to Duke. In contrast, the most recent statistics (the 2011-2012 academic year) indicate both the instruction sessions and the number of students reached had more than doubled. Librarians are now providing assistance for students in 80 percent of Illinois Wesleyan's Gateway courses.

Rather than fighting today's students' dependence on Google, Duke uses that dependence to her advantage. In her classroom presentations alongside teaching faculty, she encourages students to discuss what makes Google so easy to use and why it's the default search engine for 900 million unique visitors each month.

"Then we talk about the 80 or so academic databases the library has, and how we pay to have access to scholarly information that Google doesn't," said Duke. She said the sessions focus on teaching students how to effectively access and utilize those databases, evaluate sources, and above all, encourages students to ask a librarian for help.

Results from the ERIAL Project indicated college students exhibited a lack of understanding of search logic, didn't know how to build a search to narrow or expand results, and didn't know how various search engines (including Google) organize and display results. Duke emphasized ERIAL's findings were not unique to Illinois Wesleyan students, but said the ERIAL Project results are indicative of student attitudes and research habits across the nation.



Elise English '13 and Derek McAnally '13
study in The Ames Library.

When students did get the connection between librarians and what they do (i.e. help students and others with research), students reported high levels of satisfaction with the help provided, returned to that librarian for help with other assignments, and perhaps most important, recommended librarians to their peers, according to the ERIAL Project's findings.

Staff and faculty at The Ames Library have made physical changes as well. After realizing the word 'reference,' as in 'Reference Desk,' had no meaning for students, the Reference Desk was physically removed along with the reference collection. "The materials in the reference collection are now in the stacks, and some of those items circulate," said University Librarian and Professor Karen Schmidt. "Students now find reference material alongside the regular collections. This encourages serendipitous discovery."

"The waves resulting from the ERIAL Project have been significant," said Duke, who also served as co-editor of *College Libraries and Student Culture: What We Now Know* (ALA Editions, 2012), a publication of the ERIAL Project's findings.

The waves created by the ERIAL Project will continue breaking thanks to a grant from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation. This grant will fund research on how students acquire information literacy in their disciplines, train student tutors in writing and research skills, provide workshops for faculty and fund partnerships between library and teaching faculty.

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