

2015

# Ethnography in Action: Active Learning in Academic Library Outreach to Middle School Students

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## Repository Citation

Godbey, S., Fawley, N., Goodman, X., Wainscott, S. (2015). Ethnography in Action: Active Learning in Academic Library Outreach to Middle School Students. *Journal of Library Administration*, 55(5), 362-375.

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Title: Ethnography in Action: Active Learning in Academic Library Outreach to Middle School Students

Short Title: Ethnography in Action

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**Abstract:** This article describes an outreach activity developed and coordinated by academic librarians as part of a state program for low-income middle school students. Rather than offering a traditional library tour, the library organizers wanted to provide the middle school students with a meaningful experience that would encourage active participation, critical thinking, and alleviate library anxiety. As a spin on the traditional tour, students applied an ethnographic approach to learning about the library. The authors describe the development and implementation of the activity and provide recommendations for other librarians involved in outreach to K-12 students.

**Keywords:** academic libraries, outreach, early recruitment, ethnography, active learning, library anxiety, STEM

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**Received:** December 15, 2014

**Accepted:** January 14, 2015

Academic libraries commonly engage in outreach to their surrounding communities. The desire to adequately prepare elementary and secondary students for college education further draws universities' attention to outreach to local schools in particular, and the potential for early recruitment of young students can provide additional incentive to universities.

The University of Nevada, Las Vegas (UNLV), established in 1957, is the only public university located in the southern region of Nevada and, as such, is in a unique position to attract local residents. An overwhelming majority (84%) of UNLV undergraduates are Nevada residents. The university is also recognized as a minority-serving institution (MSI) with 49.6% of UNLV's approximately 24,000 undergraduate students identifying as a racial or ethnic minority (University of Nevada, Las Vegas, 2014).

The UNLV mission statement explicitly refers to community outreach, pledging to create a campus community that is diverse and to actively engage with the local community through outreach and research. The core theme of outreach to local residents includes support of college readiness programs that support and/or recruit local residents. A variety of outreach initiatives are in place throughout the university to support college readiness efforts, including several Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs (GEAR UP). A national competitive grant program of the United States Department of Education, all GEAR UP programs support cohorts of low-income students for multiple years, starting in middle school, by providing educational support and guidance to students and their families to increase students' likelihood of college enrollment and success. Participating colleges and universities also have the opportunity to tailor their activities to serve as early recruitment efforts for participating students. This article describes the challenges and successes of the UNLV Libraries' contribution to one of

several GEAR UP projects in which UNLV participates, specifically, the Nevada State GEAR UP program.

The UNLV Libraries consist of one central library and three branch libraries with extensive collections and services. The libraries' mission extends beyond collections and materials and emphasizes the importance of supporting learners in their research efforts, academic success, and their pursuit of lifelong learning. As a part of the library mission and vision to support learners, librarians participate in outreach efforts aimed at local residents who may enroll at UNLV in the future. The UNLV Libraries' 2011-2015 strategic plan strengthens the aim of outreach by emphasizing the role of the university library in "contribut[ing] to the institutional mission through engagement with external communities" (UNLV Libraries, n.d., p. 4). This strategic direction highlights ways the library will engage with the external community, one of which is a K-12 Teacher-Librarian Institute for Clark County School District teacher librarians. The organization outreach mission also extends to the librarian level where the Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) librarian has identified one goal of her job as assisting the University in STEM literacy outreach to the region.

The Nevada State GEAR UP program is unique in its focus on STEM careers. In preparation for campus visits, the librarians were challenged to develop an activity that was engaging and relevant to middle school students while introducing the services and support an academic library can provide for college students. Librarians developed an active-learning, inquiry-based program that addressed the unique interests of these young students, whose visit to the university was their first introduction to the independence and academic rigor of college. Over the course of the 2013-2014 academic year, 200 students from seven local middle schools visited UNLV's main library as part of the Nevada State GEAR UP program. These library visits were one

component of half-day campus visits, during which students explored spaces on campus such as science facilities and an art museum and met with different campus partners such as admissions staff. Rather than offering a traditional library tour, the library organizers wanted to provide the middle school students with a meaningful experience that would encourage active participation and critical thinking. A spin on the traditional tour, loosely based on the idea of ethnographic studies, was developed (Noe, 2009). Students were given a map of the library with a few guided questions and shown two floors of the library. They were instructed to be “ethnographers” and observe how students used the library, its services, and its spaces.

### **GEAR UP**

The GEAR UP program is a U. S. Department of Education grant program designed to increase the number of low-income students prepared to enroll and succeed in postsecondary education programs. Grant recipients, such as colleges, universities, and their partners receiving the grants work with a cohort of students from low-income schools from the seventh through twelfth grades. Low-income status is defined by enrollment in a school where 50% or more of students in that grade are either eligible for the federal free or reduced-price lunch program or by residence in public housing. GEAR UP program services are made available to all students enrolled in the school and grade level (the cohort) regardless of individual student income status (U.S. Department of Education, 2014). Funding may be provided to local or state applicants for comprehensive mentoring, outreach, and supportive services for each cohort of students. State-wide programs, such as the Nevada State GEAR UP project that the UNLV Libraries worked with, must also include a scholarship component for participating students.

The Nevada State GEAR UP program has a STEM focus and three overarching goals: to increase student and family knowledge of college options, preparation, and financing; student

academic performance and college preparation; and student high school graduation and college entrance rates (Nevada GEAR UP, n.d.). Students receive in-class and extracurricular instruction, mentoring, and activities such as field trips to university, college, and community college campuses. While the Nevada State GEAR UP program has a STEM focus, students receive information about all available undergraduate programs and services. The university libraries were contacted by and our continuing involvement is coordinated by the UNLV GEAR UP College Ambassador, a staff position funded by the Nevada State GEAR UP program. The university libraries did not receive funding from the grant and participated as part of the libraries' mission and strategic plan direction to provide outreach to the local community, particularly the K-12 education community.

## **Literature Review**

### **K-12 Outreach**

Librarians, concerned with the level of preparedness they observe in college freshmen, have started to reach out to local schools to develop programs or collaborations that can better prepare students for college-level research. UNLV Libraries, for example, holds a 3-day institute during which local K-12 school librarians and classroom teachers work to develop assignments and assessments that embed developmental information literacy into their curriculum. A key element of this institute is the opportunity to interact with academic librarians and view authentic college-level assignments in order to better prepare K-12 students for the undergraduate experience. While many outreach programs are librarian-driven and focus on helping students develop information literacy or lifelong learning skills, the programs can also serve as part of a broader recruitment effort on the part of the university.

Much of the K-12 outreach is general in nature; however, libraries are starting to follow the lead of universities and becoming part of broader STEM outreach initiatives. Two examples serve to illustrate the possibilities of engaging in wider outreach programs. Librarians at the University of South Alabama developed a library-skills curriculum as part of a summer enrichment program for local high schools to encourage and prepare minority students to enter health care professions (Rossini, Burnham, & Wright, 2013). The Ohio State University Library system provides the collections and services for a local STEM-focused high school, which has no school library (Herring, 2013).

Academic libraries are not alone in their mission to help students develop an interest in STEM fields. College and university librarians can look to their peers in public and school libraries for further ideas on supporting STEM initiatives. School librarians can encourage students' interest in STEM fields by linking their personal experiences to science-learning environments (Subramaniam, Ahn, Fleischmann, & Druin, 2012) The authors suggest that school libraries can serve as a “hybrid space to bridge the formal classroom with the broader world” (p. 163) by linking interests in science-themed books, science programs, media technology, and social networks to STEM disciplines. Public libraries can partner with community and business groups with STEM interests for financial support, resources, and volunteers for events. Displays on modern technology and innovative inventions, plus nonfiction and science-fiction books, are additional ways to create an interest in STEM fields (Hopwood, 2012).

### **Library Anxiety**

Another goal of the UNLV librarians in this project was to alleviate potential library anxiety among participants. Library anxiety is well-documented in the library literature, beginning with Mellon's 1986 study that developed the first grounded theory about library anxiety among



university students. Research into library anxiety delves into how students perceive librarians, libraries, and the experience of library use. In Mellon's study, for example, 75% to 85% of participants mentioned fear or anxiety as they described their feelings about the library, using terms such as "scary, overpowering, lost, helpless, confused, and fear of the unknown" (Mellon, 1986, p. 162). Library anxiety studies have found that the experience of library anxiety is similar to other well-known types of anxiety such as research, math, and statistics anxiety (Onwuegbuzie, Jiao, & Bostick, 2004). Library anxiety is further described as consisting of five factors: barriers with staff, affective barriers, comfort with the library, knowledge of the library, and mechanical barriers (Onwuegbuzie, Jiao, & Bostick, 2004, p. 36). When confronted with having to conduct library research, students exhibit feelings of anxiety and not knowing how to navigate the academic environment or whom to approach for help.

Bostick (1992) found that students' high levels of anxiety relate to barriers with staff, such as an aversion to approaching library staff to ask for help. Other studies have concluded that library anxiety is often state-based, meaning that students have to be at the library or contemplating using the library to experience anxiety (Jiao & Onwuegbuzie, 1999). Students specifically express anxiety as it relates to approaching library staff and comfort with library policies and library resources.

The library user's affective response, or feeling toward use of the library facilities and library staff, has been further discussed in recent work by Project Information Literacy (Head, 2013). In this broad national study, college freshmen engaged in research described the university library collections as "ginormous" (Head, 2013, p. 12) and the process of finding and selecting resources for projects as "overwhelming" (Head, 2013, p. 11). Further, many students believed

that “self-sufficiency” (Head, 2013, p. 19) was important in college and that asking for help, whether from a librarian, a professor, or tutor, would be looked down upon.

### **Library Tours**

Library tours are a standard service, especially for first-year students. Some librarians enthusiastically lead legions of students through the library highlighting key services and spaces to students, while others believe that the time could be spent more efficiently with library instruction targeted to an assignment and given at the point of need. A 2000 survey of Association of Research Libraries member libraries focused on tour administration, structure, and librarians’ perceptions of their formats. The authors found that a large majority considered traditional tours to be most effective and an important part of the academic success of the student. The guided walking tour was the most popular format. Alternative, but less frequently used formats, such as self-guided tours using printed materials or video or web formats, addressed the perceived shortcomings of the traditional tours, such as staffing requirements and ineffective use of librarians’ time (Oling & Mach, 2002).

More recent articles highlight innovative approaches to library tours that, once developed, make fewer demands on a librarian’s time. An augmented reality tour was developed at the University of Houston-Clearwater to answer frequently asked questions (Berrish, Jambhekar & Yue, 2013). Tours that are tied to an assignment are also deemed to be more successful because there is an impetus to complete it successfully. A MP3 tour was integrated into a graded assignment for the First-Year Information Literacy Program at University of South Carolina Upstate (Kearns, 2010). Brigham Young University used Quick Response (QR) codes, a type of two-dimensional barcode, to update the MP3 audio tours that were part of a required assignment in first-year courses (Whitchurch, 2012). While the literature suggests libraries are

experimenting with alternative methods to these tours, anecdotal evidence, and the experience of the authors, indicates that the traditional, librarian-led tour is still the most popular method of introducing students to a library's space and services. However, a lack of assessment of these librarian-student interactions gives librarians no clear indication of the tours' effectiveness.

### **Active Learning in Libraries**

Active learning is not a new concept in library instruction. Allen (1995) noted the potential positive impact of active learning on library instruction and argued that "Active learning strategies provide the opportunity to offer students the freedom and the responsibility to be themselves, to utilize their interests and learning styles in the content and design of their educational experiences" (p. 91). Jacobson and Mark (1995) discussed the potential for active learning to empower learners in the library classroom. A 2002 survey (Hollister & Coe, 2002) of over 2,000 instruction librarians revealed that those librarians favored active learning as an instructional strategy, but noted that active-learning activities can be time-consuming given the time limitations imposed on library instruction. More recently, Booth (2011) has noted that information professionals tend to have less systematic training in educational theory and pedagogy than other educators. Booth has emerged as one of the strongest proponents of a constructivist approach to library instruction and interactions and acknowledges the challenge presented to librarians in avoiding excessive detail in library instruction because they, as experts, can forget how to approach topics from the inexpert perspective of their students. She draws on work of constructivist theorists such as John Dewey to encourage librarians to "shift the focus of instruction from passive to active, from educator to learner, and from cognition to learning community" (Booth, 2011, p. 39). Further, active learning strategies have been found to have a

positive effect on student perceptions of librarians and library resources, as well as decreased library anxiety (Detlor, Booker, Serenko, & Julien, 2012).

The specific active learning strategy incorporated in this project used an ethnographic method rather than a traditional library tour. Ethnography involves “the close observation of social practices and interactions,” with ethnographers “analyzing multiple types of data, such as interviews, direct observation, photographs, journals, or cultural artifacts” (Duke & Asher, 2011, p. 3). A recent analysis of the use of ethnographic methods in libraries (Khoo, Rozaklis, & Hall, 2012) noted an increase in the use of these data-collection methods in order to help improve library services and/or instruction. These ethnographic studies cover topics such as the evaluation of information literacy instruction (Pencek, Nelson, & Brians, 2009), wayfinding in libraries (Hahn & Zitron, 2011) and website usability (Klare & Hobbs, 2011). One large-scale ethnographic study is the Ethnic Research in Illinois Academic Libraries (ERIAL) Project, a two-year ethnographic study across five Illinois universities that attempted to better understand how college students conduct research and use library resources and services (Duke & Asher, 2011). Ethnographic methods as an instructional strategy is less documented, however. The group decided to follow the model set by librarians at Auburn University (Noe, 2009; Carter, 2011) and turn the middle school library visitors into ethnographers.

## **The Project**

### **Development of Activity**

The UNLV Libraries were contacted in September 2013 to potentially host up to 3 hours of activities for 225 students who would be visiting the campus the following month, 3 days of 75 students each. The three initial contacts in the library were Sue Wainscott, STEM Librarian; Xan Goodman, Health and Life Sciences Librarian; and Samantha Godbey, Education Librarian.

These three librarians had coordinated other STEM outreach efforts. They also reached out to Nancy Fawley, Head of the Library Liaisons Program, due to the possible magnitude of the project.

Goals proposed by the GEAR UP College Ambassador focused on increasing students' ability to succeed in rigorous academic courses. Proposed learning outcomes included educating the students about the function of the libraries in the learning process and educational mission of the university, STEM-focused resources available through the libraries, and career resources at the UNLV Libraries.

In conjunction with the GEAR UP College Ambassador, we decided that rather than hosting all 75 students for 3 hours at a time, we would conduct a one-hour workshop with groups of 25 students at a time. Students would be visiting other departments on campus in groups of 25 in order to alleviate the burden on any single campus partner. Considering the amount of time allotted to the activity, we would focus on the first of the learning outcomes proposed by the GEAR UP College Ambassador: to educate the students about the libraries' role in the learning process.

We were aware that the participants would be a mix of seventh and eighth graders, and that for most of these students, this would be their first experience in an academic library. In fact, they would most likely have a range of personal experience with libraries. We were also attentive to the fact that these students still had 5 or 6 more years in this program, and we would likely be meeting with these students multiple times in the years that would follow. Not only would we not want to repeat activities for the same students, but we would need to scaffold any instruction across potential visits over multiple years. Furthermore, since the activity would not be tied to a

particular academic project or assignment, we were aware that making the activity relevant and worthwhile to the students would be a challenge.

The activity would need to be developmentally and age-appropriate. What we had done in the past with undergraduates would not work here. With college students, we generally work toward a specific assignment. Even high school students have a more immediate interest in college and are doing research that is often comparable to what can be expected in the university setting. This activity, however, would need to be situated within the middle school context. We focused on developing an active learning activity that would draw on students' prior experience and give them an introduction to the to the academic library experience.

As a group, the librarians decided to focus on introducing students to the function of the libraries in the learning process and decreasing library anxiety. Through doing so, we could make the first steps toward increasing the students' college readiness, enrollment, and success. Having identified these priorities, we realized that we didn't want the students to spend their entire library visit in a classroom; we wanted them to actually experience the library environment. One of the authors had inverted the traditional library tour at a previous institution by allowing students to take the lead. We decided that this kind of student-led exploration would be the main activity we would use with the seventh and eighth graders. We also decided to include student library workers in the activity, in order to give our visitors the opportunity to interact directly with undergraduate students.

### **Ethnographer for a Day**

**Introduction.** Upon arrival, students were led to a library instruction room. Students were welcomed by one of the librarians and led in a short discussion to activate prior knowledge about libraries. Students responded to questions about their experience with their school libraries and

public libraries and any differences they might have noticed between the two. Students were asked whether they had any prior experience with an academic library; these students had none. Students were also introduced to the concept of ethnographic research. We explained that rather than leading them on a tour, we would be asking them to carefully observe the library to see what they could learn themselves.

Librarians and student workers introduced themselves to attendees, including their subject areas of expertise or majors, and then dispatched groups of four to eight students out into the library. Each group included a librarian or student worker, but the GEAR UP students were encouraged to take the lead.

**Observe.** The students were provided with a handout on which to record their observations of the library. The handout included blank maps of two floors of the library. Service desks were labeled with stars. Students were asked to label each service desk and observe the library as they explored. The handout also included questions such as: *How would you use this space? What do you observe about the library on this floor? What do you observe about the people on this floor?* Finally, a question in the margin of the handout encouraged the visitors to engage with the library faculty and student workers in their groups about their college and career paths.

Students were given 20 to 30 minutes to explore the first and top floors of the library. We selected the first floor, as this floor has all of the library's service desks, and a range of study and computing spaces. The top floor includes book stacks, study spaces, and the library's most striking views – of the library itself from the top of an atrium, and of the city and Las Vegas Strip from the library windows. These two floors would give students a sense of the services and spaces that the library offers and provide them with a visually memorable experience.

The middle school visitors were very interested in observing college students eating in the library, watching nonacademic videos on the library computers (e.g., “He’s watching *The Walking Dead!*”), and studying in groups. Students were impressed by the size of the library as compared to their school libraries, and lamented some of the stricter policies and limited hours at their own schools. Students asked detailed questions about the broader college experience, including whether college students have curfews and who does their laundry. They also asked the UNLV libraries staff and students questions about their own careers and educational experiences, including how they managed to pay for their degrees.

**Share.** After the allotted time, groups returned to the library classroom to report about their experience. During these final 10 minutes of the activity, students noted what they had observed, reflected on the experience, and speculated about their own future lives as college students.

### **Recommendations**

#### **Include College Students**

As noted in the description of the activity, participants were placed in groups of four to eight students for the activity. We found that this size group was ideal. Larger groups can be difficult to manage and give personal attention, while students can become self-conscious in groups smaller than four. Including library student employees in the activity was extremely helpful. During the final debrief of the activity, the GEAR UP students asked a number of questions about college life that were directed toward the college students, including “Why did you pick UNLV?” Each group of middle school students was assigned to a group with a librarian or other staff person. Ideally, each group would include a librarian and a student employee.

#### **Allow the Students to Lead**



The ethnographic approach to introducing the library allowed GEAR UP students to pose questions about the library environment rather than simply taking part in a library tour. However, this approach was challenging for library faculty and staff, who were accustomed to leading activities themselves. Our student workers, who have been explicitly trained to lead library tours, found this to be especially difficult. As experts about our own libraries, we want to share our expertise, but by allowing the visitors to observe and determine the focus of their attention, those visitors can take ownership of their learning and identify aspects of the library with which they can relate. At the same time, some of the middle school students were reluctant to be seen observing and writing notes as they walked around the library. One strategy we found helpful was to pretend to address the group in strategic locations in the library. That way, the students appear to be looking at the librarian but instead can examine what was happening behind the librarian.

### **Integrate Assessment of Outcomes**

After each visit, student participants offered feedback to the GEAR UP College Ambassador about their experience. Comments were overwhelmingly positive, and students mentioned specific librarians and students by name, suggesting that we may have been successful in reducing librarian anxiety. A recommendation for future outreach activities is to incorporate direct assessment of outcomes, rather than relying solely on anecdotal feedback. Assessments could include a survey of the students at the end of the activity or later in the academic year. Student worksheets could also be collected and scored on a rubric related to our stated outcomes.

### **Be Deliberate about Scaffolding**

Further, it is important to consider scaffolding within the activity itself and across years with a multi-year initiative. For example, during the activity, we drew on students' prior knowledge

before introducing new concepts. We set the stage for the activity by asking students if they had experience in other types of libraries, school or public, in order to introduce the university library to middle school students. To further reduce library anxiety over time, we plan to build on this activity to introduce students to the library as a place for conducting research and library faculty as resources to assist with research. For example, we might add an activity in future years in which students explore career paths with an active learning activity using one of the databases available to all state residents.

### **Be Strategic about Outreach**

Finally, outreach must be strategically pursued. There will doubtless be many opportunities for the university libraries to participate and partner with student recruitment projects, STEM outreach programs, and other university-led outreach activities. In fact, it is difficult at times to say no to worthy projects due to time or other constraints. Using the university libraries' strategic plan as an initial filter for opportunity selection, followed by the consideration of staff's individual goals, can be useful in evaluating potential outreach opportunities. Moreover, a deep understanding of the university's mission and strategic goals will allow us to proactively seek out additional opportunities that offer the best fit and outcomes for university libraries' outreach and service activities, with an eye toward building strategic long-term partnerships.

### **Conclusion**

The Nevada State GEAR UP program is a multi-year initiative, and students will continue to make college and university campus visits. At press time, plans have not been made for the following year's visits; however, librarians are planning to develop an activity that scaffolds on the ethnographic tour of the previous year. As students progress in grade level, the focus will be

on developing critical thinking skills that will prepare them for higher education and to integrate activities that draw on the library's collections.

As academic librarians, we have little contact with middle school students in a professional context. The wide-eyed surprise of students witnessing the differences between UNLV's library and their school libraries was fun to observe. The low-stakes nature of the activity allowed students to engage with librarians and library spaces in a novel way that lessened their anxiety and increased their confidence. Allowing the students to discover these differences on their own, without a traditional lecture or tour from a librarian, gave them a chance to form their own opinions about higher education and their potential future role as college students.

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