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Title: Perceptions and Promises of the University

Course: Anth411 Section 1G and 1U (Methods of Cultural Anthropology)
Fall 2007 -- Nancy A Abelmann

About the Author: I am a senior majoring in anthropology and history. My academic interests include social/class, economic, race and power relations of the past and present, environmental sustainability and issues, and human development.

Keywords: University, education, perceptions, interviews,

Abstract: This research aims to discover if students are receiving what they need out of a university education. I will study how students perceive the idea of university education in relation to relevance of life outside of university, that is the realm of the 'real world'. In essence, what are students getting out of university education in comparison to what higher education is trying to provide? After limited preliminary research I would hypothesize that today's university education does not truly educate students in areas relevant to their future. In general, students are learning, but they are not learning what universities and colleges may expect in terms of a "traditional" education.

Initial Exercises:

Reading Response

Initial Exercises:

Observation

Initial Exercises: <!-- @page { size: 8.5in 11in; margin: 0.79in } P { margin-bottom: 0.08in } -->

Analysis of a Text

Both Norman Fairclough and Peter Ewell's articles made me think about what our own university assumes about itself. To discover this, I thought I would start at the top of the University of Illinois hierarchy. I looked at Chancellor Richard Herman's "Welcome to the University" piece, located at <http://www.oc.uiuc.edu/welcome/index.html>.

The assumptions I found were plentiful in his writing, but I would like to make it a point to say not all assumptions made may have been wrong or a necessarily bad thing. When looked at through the framework of Ewell and Fairclough, even the introductory sentences become problematic. "Welcome to the University of Illinois. It's a place where excellence, innovation, and tradition have

combined to produce a unique institution.” These first sentences assume that our university has achieved excellence and innovated to such a degree that it is unique in some way. Furthermore, this excellence and innovation have created a tradition. Who is the judge of this so-called excellence our institution has achieved? Is it the magazines that review the best universities? If so, don't these publications assume that excellence is quantifiable? How this assumed excellence is also important to analyze. If the university is funded by unethical corporations that abuse workers rights can what the university achieves still be assumed excellent? Innovation is also problematic. Innovation is not always a positive step. My own assumption about Chancellor Herman's “Welcome”, as I am relatively sure he intended, is that he wanted to cast a positive light on the university. At first glance he does this well, but when these words are decompacted they become just buzzwords and lose any meaning.

Just a paragraph later Chancellor Herman lays out four main assumptions about the University of Illinois. “Today, this university has many faces: a superb undergraduate institution for exceptionally talented students (1); a research powerhouse that produces breathtaking discoveries and advances in knowledge (2); one of the world's leading training grounds for the next generation of scientists, professors, and policy makers (3); and, a force shaping the possibilities of the future across the domains of human endeavor (4).” While all four of these issues may be problematic, it is the first I would like to concentrate on since I am currently an undergraduate and personally have problems with that assumption. There is the assumption that the university is full of exceptionally talented undergraduates. How can this be if more and more freshmen are accepted into the University of Illinois every year? To my knowledge, there are two answers; either there are a higher number of high school students achieving at a very high level (this supposed level of “exceptionally talented”) that are being let in or; there are students that are less than “exceptional” that are being accepted. If the ACT is analyzed in a way to compare students ability over time, it is generally true that students scores get higher. (This I gathered from a very short, swift amount of research and may prove to be faulty. Please see <http://chronicle.com/subscribe/login?url=/daily/2006/08/2006081601n.htm>.) Yet at the same time more and more students have been taking the ACT. This could mean that the scores are rising solely because there are more chances for the test scores to be higher because of the amount of students taken the test. Either that or there was an extraordinary amount of questions that had answers of “c”. All joking aside, the assumptions that the University of Illinois

is still accepting only the “best” high school seniors is not necessarily true.

The next part of Herman's first assumption is that the U of I is a superb undergraduate institution. How is this judged? Do undergraduates regularly go on to do world-changing or extraordinary things in their lives? Is this because the university trained them to do that or was it because of skills they learned on their own? Here's a different take on the assumption of the U of I as a “superb undergraduate institution: are the undergrads happy? Do they enjoy their classes? Does the university stimulate them to learn or is the U of I just one place of many where undergrads could go to finish the “chore” of learning? In my own experience, some classes are not enjoyable, which inhibits learning. Because of this inhibition, I sometimes feel I could learn better at another university or even on my own. What does this say about an assumed “superb” institution?

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A Practice Interview

How did you end up at the U of I?

I interviewed a first generation South Korean sophomore. I started by asking what kind of influences were at work pushing him towards the University of Illinois, if there were any. The answer was mostly a mumbled, “eh...” but after I told him some of what I had experienced (i.e. parental pressure) he answered a little more completely. He answered that his parents had definitely influenced him to attend the U of I. At this, I became a bit worried because I may have prompted his answer by explaining my own situation, which was parental influence. But, with no further prompting he continued to tell me that both sisters and many of his cousins had come here.

“Why do you think that is?” I asked.

He proceeded to tell me that because his parents were immigrants from South Korea, he believed they saw the University of Illinois as a status symbol: it's a place where a good family sends their kids. He viewed this as “snobby” of his parents, trying to heighten their social status by sending their children to the University of Illinois. I now wonder who the student's parents felt they had to impress? Most definitely a line of questioning I wish I had followed. He also told me that on top of the status symbol characteristic, his mother had known that the U of I was within their financial means and is a

“very good” school. He said she studied rankings from magazines and also had prior experience of U of I's “good school” reputation because she sent her daughters her. What I found interesting here is that the student made no mention of his father. Was he not involved in the decision? Did the student or the mother not value his opinion? I regret not pursuing that route of questioning. After asking if anything else influenced his attendance at the University of Illinois he said, “Nope that's (meaning his parents) pretty much it.”

I then switched topics somewhat and asked what he thought of the school. I thought it would be interesting to know, especially after having this parental pressure to come to this particular institution, what the student thought of it. Essentially, he said that he was proud that he went to a good school and that his parents could be proud of him but also that he sometimes feels “like (I'm) wasting my parents time and money. I'm not always sure what I should be doing here.” I then asked what he meant by “doing.” By “doing,” the student means what he should be studying and what he should be aiming for after college. From personal experience I know that many students feel this way. I asked what he wanted to do after school; what did he feel like he should be doing? He answered the first part of the question but not the second.

“I want to spend a year and get Awesomeness Nonsense off the ground.”

“What's Awesomeness Nonsense?” I asked.

“It's a band I play in. We've been playing together for a few years, released a CD a year ago. I play guitar.”

I proceeded to learn that because the student went to the University of Illinois while the rest of the band went to community college to stick around each other to keep playing music. I then asked him if he felt his going away to school had hurt the band in any way.

“Yeah probably. We still play once in a while and are trying to get another album together so not all is lost.”

Throughout the interview I gathered some more background information that I think is important to put in this writeup. The student's parents moved to the United States after the Vietnam War to find better opportunities for themselves and their future children. The student lived and went to school in a suburb of Chicago until the seventh grade and then moved to a more distant suburb to

finish high school.

Question: EDIT: I have decided against trying to ask students how they "view the university in a capitalist society." I believe this question is extremely difficult pragmatically, as I cannot imagine how to ask it without baiting the answer. So, although I find the question interesting, I will have to come back to it sometime in the future. With that I have decided to base my project around a different question: How do students feel about their education through the university? This may seem even more broad than the original question but I am going to try to focus around several interview questions. Among them, "What do you think you are paying for here at the university?" and "What did/do you see yourself getting out of this arrangement?" I believe this new focus will narrow my project.

I have in my head the inklings of a study that would involve the notions of the university as an institution and how students view it as such. To be a little less vague, I would like to plan a study to discover how students see their university as a larger part of society in a capitalist economy. Do students feel their education is a product, perhaps created by the university? If so, does this product keep its promises? (The idea that the University of Illinois is a prestigious school, will help students in obtaining jobs, etc.) Essentially, I want to find out if the university does what the students need it to do, and, in the process, I will also find out just what it is the students need the university to do for them. This entire idea needs to be developed into something more concrete which I will do in the coming week.

Plan: To find an answer to my question a good amount of interviews will have to be done. Taking the time constraints of the semester into account I think about 20-25 interviews would be adequate to form a small base of knowledge about how students perceive the university. I hope to interview students in different majors, schools, and years to gain a wider view of what it is that the student body thinks. I have a tape recorder which I will use as often as I can and I will also take notes during the interviews. I'm not sure yet if any sort of field observations will be necessary but I am open to the idea. I'm just not sure yet if I would need to observe much to get at the answer to my question.

Data: This is an interview I did with a senior in civil engineering at the University of Illinois. The interviewee, who wished his pseudonym to be BoDerrick, has been here all four years of college and plans on graduating in spring of '09. The interview took place in his place of residence, in his room. I felt that this was a good place because

A Project Interview

it kept me, the interviewer, from gaining any power during the interview since BoDerrick was comfortable in his setting. I decided to start out with the basic question we used in our practice interviews because I felt that it led me different places during the practice interview and could also do so here. My speech is in bold while BoDerrick's is in regular, non-bold font. My thoughts on the interview are in italics. Also the ellipses (...) are pauses and places where conversation trails off. I didn't take anything out.

So, how did you end up at u of i?

I think this question opens up conversation in many ways. The interviewee can answer any way he or she wants with no restrictions except for talking about themselves pertaining to the university. From a personal standpoint, I think the question is rather disarming. My rule: anything you can hear sitting around with your friends is at least somewhat disarming.

Well, my dad made me apply to nine colleges and send the checks and write all the papers for it. So I thought it was a huge waste of time, but... I was actually planning on going to Purdue because I didn't think I could make it in here engineering-wise, but I did.

I felt "a huge waste of time" was a definite marker so I decided to follow up on it instead of diving more into the area I wanted to study.

So when you say "a waste of time" does that mean applying here (U of I) or all of them (all colleges)?

Well, applying to so many.

Ok, because...

Not to sound cocky or anything but I got accepted everywhere.

BoDerrick doesn't mean applying to college is a waste of time, just that applying to so many was a waste when he knew he would get into the one he wanted at the time which was Purdue.

So you figured you'd get in?

Well, I didn't figure I'd get in here. That was a surprise.

Before you came here, what did you think of the University?

Here I decide I need to actually start getting into my planned questions a bit before the conversation forks off to topics of little interest to the research project. I thought BoDerrick would emphasize the U of I's reputation more, but he chose something else to emphasize:

Well I didn't really think about the schoolwork and the school load or any of that kind of stuff which is kind of weird. But I didn't think it'd be much different from high school as far as work load. But yeah, I wasn't prepared for that at all. I had a rough time first semester freshman year but I've been doing better ever since. And, I don't know. I didn't really know much about the U of I but I knew the engineering academics was good.

His answer made me think of an entirely different research question which would be "Does high school prepare students for college? Or is the focus more on standardized tests instead of critical thinking?"

When did you figure out you wanted to do engineering?

My mom had me take a Meyer-Briggs Test.

By now I had gathered that his parents, like most, were a large part of the process of deciding where and how to continue his own education. Just an FYI, a Meyer-Briggs Test is a skills test that tries to inform you what field of work you might be best for and enjoy the most.

So then engineering came up, or something math or physics related?

Yeah. So I actually applied here for electrical but that was not a good fit for me because nobody would talk to me in class...

Why?

I don't know. They were more focused on doing well and listening to the teacher. So I got out of there first semester and I've been civil ever since.

This small sequence of answers is very strange. If I were a psych major I might be able to assess it more but I'm not. All that I can gather is that he may feel the Electrical Engineering classes, the topics and the people, were not only unwelcoming, but just plain rejected him.

So after you get out of here and graduate do you think as far as the expectations of U of I being a good engineering school and helping you out and getting you a job, do you think that's going to help as far as getting a job?

Ugh. A very convoluted question. I'm still trying to get at my main research question though. I try not to "beg the question" or prompt his answer by having him explain if he thinks he'll get a job. I really want to know if he thinks that the U of I kept it's "promises."

Definitely. Especially for civil because if it's not the top one it's at least the top five. So people will see that. And yeah I mean gpa is important and I don't have the best gpa but just going here and getting through it so far, it means a lot.

I think in a round-about way he does think the University kept it's promises, as long as that promise was to produce a student that is hire-able in the real world.

Same here (Both laugh). So it sounds like going here and taking classes here is going to be productive as far as your goal of becoming a civil engineer?

Yeah. It's not so much the overall grades I'm getting but the challenge of getting stuff done and you know... trying my best. I'm definitely not the smartest one in my class by far... trying my best.

Grades and gpa are both emphasized in these last few questions. From this interview, and just general experience on campus, I get the picture that grades and gpa mean a lot more on the Engineering Quad than the LAS Quad. For BoDerrick, he tries to de-emphasize his gpa and grades, citing that "trying your best" and "getting stuff done" in a "top five" civil engineering program should be taken into account as far as obtaining jobs.

How do you view your education in our economical system? Some kids will say they're getting sold an education but other people will be like you make the best out of your education or you have to apply yourself to get an education. What do you think of that?

Here I turn to a more direct approach of getting at the question of the university in a capitalist setting. Are we buying knowledge? Is that something that is "right"?

Well, I think a lot of it depends on if you're paying for it or not. I think (one of interviewee's friends, now referred to as Y) felt like this a lot of the time: since his parents were paying for it he didn't feel motivated enough. But most of the money is coming if not from my from my grandma. I mean I'm doing the best I can... the grades aren't as good as they could be or should be but I'm challenging myself, I'm learning new things, I try to go to all of my classes, and I don't know... I think university and college is overpriced but I think that if you apply yourself, challenge yourself people will see that you made it through this university... or you know, you did well... made an effort. Does that answer the question?

I must admit some frustration here. This is a question I really want answered yet I don't think I got it. At the same time I can't tell if he answered the question in his own thinking or if I'm looking for a particular answer.

Yeah that is kind of getting at it... You're gaining this education that is supposed to help you out in the real world after you graduate but on the other hand there's the idea that you're gaining knowledge and the idea that knowledge shouldn't be a product of an institution or just the idea that you're paying to get knowledge which is *supposed* to help you in the real world... if you look at it as a path of events it's like you pay... you get knowledge... knowledge helps you in the real world... do you find that all worth it?

Not really, because I'll probably be getting a job... I'm kind of picking a major and minor that I've already kind of taking classes for. I mean I didn't really have a plan of what I was going to major or minor in. I just picked the ones that went best with what I've already taken. And I've already had an internship in transportation and I think I'll be getting a co-op in transportation so... yeah, I'm getting... I'm paying to learn here but I probably won't use what I learned here...

From the answers of these last two questions I think I've come to the conclusion that engineers and anthropologists do not think the same way. I know, most every knows this (at least anthropologists), but I just thought I pour more evidence on the pile. This different way of thinking is a problem for me though. We both understand the words we are using, just in different ways. I've been taught to think about people and how they adapt and live while he knows so much more math than I that it's rather embarrassing.

So taking that into account, education-wise do you think your time here is productive?

I definitely feel like.. I mean I don't do a lot of reading or writing, I spend a lot more time... There was a while where I felt like I was wasting my time but I've already come this far so... yeah I'm probably not going to get a job in what I'm studying so that lowers the motivation but...

Here again is the "waste of time" comment. I think here it is more meaningful, almost like school just wasn't worthwhile for him at one point. I should have asked when in the course of his school career he felt this but didn't. The last part of the sentence was said with a lighthearted chuckle just to be clear. I think BoDerrick definitely feels mixed about the university and how it has helped him. On one hand, he's not truly studying what he's going to be going into after college. Yet on the other hand, he knows his degree from the U of I will mean a lot to future employers.

Well do you feel that the University is kind of practical and impractical at the same time because it'll force you to schedule out your tasks but that tasks aren't pertaining to anything you are going to be doing?

Yeah... Yeah, it's made me a lot more schedul-ly. "This is when I'm doing this, this is when I'm doing this." It's made me more organized. It's not about he work you do, it's about how you set deadlines and about how you motivate yourself.

Here again we see that the U of I has helped him, but not in the way he may have hoped. From this I don't think the U of I kept its promise, but it still helped its student. The student may not know this though. This is where the interview ended. A few more things were said that deviated into chit-chat and then I offered my thanks.

Data: EDIT (NEW INTERVIEW IN PLACE OF ARCHIVE DATA)

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I tried to do a few things differently in this interview. First I decided to interview a freshman. Perhaps a fresh face at the university would give a different outlook compared to my older interviewees. Also, I decided to try a new medium for this interview. I did it over

aim (don't worry, I have the forms). The drawbacks were that it was impossible to read people's emotions or intonation. This is the major flaw in electronic or written interviews. The information gained from these forms is invaluable, as long as the transcription of such actions is accurate. There were some positives of this way of interviewing. First, there is an avoidance of general social awkwardness. By this I mean that there were no long pauses, complete trail offs into nothing, and stumbling over words. The questions I asked were relatively straight and to the point and so were my interviewee's answers. For me, I do not think these positives outweigh the negatives. I do not think I will be trying this again if I have an opportunity to do a face to face interview. I decided to try and be reflexive as possible about the medium I chose as well as the interview itself. As a side note, I have edited any "aim-speak" into real words and fixed capitalization and spelling issues. A "P" (for Phil) indicates my written message and an "I" (for Interviewee) indicates my interviewee's written message. I'll also do the bolding and italics as before. And so it begins...

P: Ok. My project focuses on what students want and what students need from the u of i and if they're getting it or not. So basically i ask you why you decided to come to college and follow up from there...

P: So, why did you decide to go to college?

I: In general? Not specifically uiuc?

P: We'll focus on uiuc in a minute

P: If that's ok.

I: Ok.

I: Further study in specific fields in hopes to achieve a respectable career

Here is an example of the succinct answers that are easily possible through this medium. Short and to the point. Used to longer winded answers, I question on...

P: What do you define a respectable career as? Or what fields do you see as respectable?

I thought my interviewee's use of 'respectable' was a point to follow up on considering I've have not heard it used in this context before with my other interviews.

I: Those beyond high school education.

Ok, somewhat of a circular question and answer we've got going on here...

P: Ok, so you don't want some dead end job?

Must get out of the loop...

I: Basically

Phew, made it out. Time to move on.

P: So why did you apply to U of I specifically?

I: Affordability

P: Any other reasons? Feel free to be verbose. Hehe.

I: Well it's a good school anyways. Plus my brother goes here so I had a general idea of what it was like.

This is pretty close to the general answers I have received from other interviewees.

P: Did you apply to any other schools?

I: Columbia, Depaul, Wisconsin (Madison) and Mizzou

P: Did you get into any/all of them?

I: Well, I began to apply but I didn't send them all after my mom and dad set the budget for schools. I sent my Columbia application because it was my number one school and I did get in.

P: Ok, so you came to college to study something to get a respectable career, and to u of i because it was affordable, yet respectable university?

Recap time

I: Bingo

P: And do you see u of i helping you out in obtaining that "respectable career"?

I: Yes

Here's where instant message interviews are all or nothing. If I was talking to him in person, he may have paused or sighed before his answer. Here, we only see a definite, black and white "yes". Knowing this, I try to get a bit more out of him.

P: How so?

I: By offering classes that not only set towards my desired major, but are legitimately interesting.

P: Would you say that the interesting part of class outweighs any idea of these classes going towards a major or the other way around?

P: I guess what i want to ask is do you find yourself generally interested in your classes pertaining to your major?

One can still have slip up in conversations, even in writing.

I: The ones pertaining to my major, yes.

P: And the ones that don't?

I: decent, but that's why I chose the major.

P: Right right, do you think this major will be applicable to the career you want to pursue after school?

I: Yes.

This is starting to feel like a trip to the dentist's office. I'm sitting there extracting teeth...

P: do you know what you want to do after school?

I: I'd like to do cartography but i'm not sure where yet.

P: Ok, well that's about it. Thanks.

After writing this up I realize that it may be more painful to read than it was to be a part of. I suppose this goes to show that instant message conversations lack the casual aspect of the face to face interview. Instant messages, as I now blatantly realize, lack aspects of conversation that one finds normal in face to face interaction. There are no "you knows?" at the end of sentences, no variations in pitch, no utterances. Also, I wonder if my interviewee felt that power was an issue here. And if it was, was I put in a place of power more so than I would be if I conducted this face to face?

As far as my project goes, this was an opposite take of the university than some of my older interviewees. Most definitely refreshing in this aspect, I think I may tentatively hypothesize in my final paper that age of the student is a factor in perceptions of the university.

EDIT: I do not think I'll be researching past mission statements. I think at the time I was thinking of doing this my history background got the best of me. I realized there would be nothing to really compare the past mission statements to. I can take today's and see if it's working for current students but I can't take ones from the past because I haven't got any students from the past to see if it worked for them. If I did though, and maybe this is where I could go if this was real long term, I could have one heck of a book or something.

Before this assignment I was not too sure if I was going to be using the archive for much of anything (even knowing the vast resources it has). I think I may have changed my mind. In searching, I found the old "Scope and Mission Statement" from 1973-1974 presented by then- President John Corbally, who was president from 1971 to 1979. Of course it may not be as exciting as finding a dusty relic from the Mayan era, but I think I may be able to use this. The "Statement" could be compared with the present statement to see if changes have been made to adapt to a changing student and culture base. If others are found, and I'm relatively sure they can be, they would also help judge the change that has taken place over time in the University's goals for itself, its students and its faculty.

So how will a bunch of mission statements aid my project? Don't know yet...kidding. I hope to be able to compare them to what I get out of my interviews, that is I will find what students think they are "getting" out of college (or paying for...see revised plan) ad

compare it to what the university hopes for them. In doing this, I will be able to find out just how well the university is doing against its own standards. As an overall, "what will your project be doing for society" type of deal, I hopefully will be able to find out how students perceptions of western education measure up to what western education wants for them.

I was spurred this route by my project interviewee. Hearing him say that more than anything he has learned organizational skills and networking skills instead of engineering skills was surprising. It is also a statement that warrants more investigation. If students are mostly gaining these "life" skills, instead of the skills the university intends to teach, such as engineering or anthropology methods, I do think the education system would need to take a long hard look at itself.

Data: Finally got that interview in, sorry it's so late...

Data Continued The person a talked to was a senior in anthropology. Because of this, I think he understood a little more of what I was trying to ask and "get at" than the engineering student. The interview is short, but I believe it still offers good insight. Unfortunately, I did not have a way of recording this interview but did take some quickly scribbled notes. I consciously went against what the norm seems to be in having prepared questions. Instead I just tried to start a conversation and get the interviewee talking. This worked about as well as having prepared questions did for my other interviewee. But I think this was because the interviewee that did not receive my prepared questions was an anthropology student. He recognized social situations and the relationship of students to the University. In other words I could not have used this "unprepared" method for the engineering student. Since I just have notes, and any transcript attempt would be faulty, I will try to hash out the main points without quoting too much:

I started off the same way as before with the question "How did you get to U of I?" My interviewee emphasized cost versus reputation. He explained the University's reputation as the best public school in the state and one of the best in the nation and its comparably low cost. He said because of his financial situation that he would have had to attend public school no matter what and that he should aim for the best out what is offered. He has three other siblings, straining the financial help he can receive from his parents. Due to this, he works on and off during the school year to keep attending the U of I.

I asked him about what he was studying, which was anthropology.

He said he enjoyed it, but that it sometimes didn't consider things like complexity. He said that although anthro generally does a good job describing and interpreting social relations and communities, there is no way that it is absolutely accurate considering the complexities and changing nature of Homo sapien. And yet some anthropologists claim that "*this* is the way it is," he said. I told him that I was relatively sure that any reasonable anthropologist would acknowledge the changing nature of h. sapien and the complexities involved with trying to explain cultures.

Before we delved into further debate I changed the subject in somewhat of an abrupt manner but it did not upset my interviewee. I asked him if he thinks his degree will help him once out of college. The answer was yes. He knew a degree in general would help him get a job. The degree is important, but the friendships and social interactions are more important, he claimed. I had to agree. Even the best degree would not be worth it if there was no social interaction. Degrees are concrete, so they stand up well in a business world, he went on. Friendships don't. Society doesn't take that into account. The emphasis is on physical proof of being educated, and not always what you're educated in, he said. He was basically doing all my work for me: He felt that a degree is important, but that not always what was behind it, ie the courses taken and what was literally learned in class. Even more so, he felt that social webs were far more important, this emphasized several times.

While this interviewee seemed to agree with the first one, I think this one allows for more grey room. In this case, the student feels that his degree is worthwhile but maybe not in a practical way in that he'll be using everything he learned at his job. The first interviewee seemed to imply that he would not even be using what he learned in his job.

Data: I think that it would be neat to produce a fuller length documentary on my topic. Given that, I wrote the following, which would be
Video/Plan concise (2-3 minutes) but could also be used as the basis for an intro to a longer film.

Opening shot: A student wakes up and grabs his/her books. The camera follows him/her on their way to class somewhere on the quad.

Narrator (Over the opening shot): "Millions of students attend colleges and universities across the nation. Why is this? What is it

that students need from higher education? What is it that these universities are offering? What does each side promise the other? Are they delivering?"

Title Screen: "Higher Education: Are Universities Delivering on Their Promises?"
(I'm thinking I need a better title...)

Second shot: Lecture hall, probably Foellinger. We see students taking notes, listening to the lecturer, whispering to each other, others on their computer, and others sleeping.

Narrator (Over second shot): "Are universities providing students with material they need to succeed? The education necessary to obtain jobs in their fields? The motivation to continue learning?"

Discuss: <!-- @page { size: 8.5in 11in; margin: 0.79in } P { margin-bottom: 0.08in } -->

The University provides a very broad and expansive statement on its goals and visions here: <http://www.uillinois.edu/about/mission.cfm>. The website states the University's mission, vision, and guiding values. These three things correspond to promises. Promises of what the University will provide for its faculty, community, state, society, and of course, students. It is comparable to the University stating what it will provide to all those that are a part of it. The Mission Statement is this: "The University of Illinois will transform lives and serve society by educating, creating knowledge and putting knowledge to work on a large scale and with excellence." The University is stating "here is what we will do for our community, on both a local and global scale." But is the University keeping its promises to its most local community, its students?

After preliminary research, I can put forth a tentative hypothesis that the University of Illinois is providing at least some its students with an education that does not help them in their hopeful career field. That said, I have only conducted a few interviews centered on this topic. Even with so little research done, I believe the hypothesis has some worth in being suggested to the university because if even one student feels that his education is of little use, especially if it is in the field that he or she is going into, the university needs to rethink its curriculum.

To reach this hypothesis I interviewed two senior students at the University of Illinois Champaign-Urbana. Again, two students might

not seem like too much to support my claim, but I believe the University needs to be accountable for all of its students' experiences in the academic realm. My first interviewee was a civil engineering student. While the student claims attending the University of Illinois will help him in the future, it is not in the ways generally expected.

"It's made me more organized. It's not about the work you do, it's about how you set deadlines and about how you motivate yourself."

Throughout the interview, things such as grades and G.P.A. were stressed and deemed important. But it was the idea that what one learned outside the University was more important than what was learned from within its walls. Another important item, relevance of curriculum, was discussed. The student felt that he would not find use for his years of education beside the degree it gave him. Now, of course all students learn something relevant to their future careers even if it is only the thought that college was unnecessary for what they are now doing. Yet the idea that students commit several years of their lives to learning something that does not have anything to do with their future is troubling.

Another student I interviewed, an anthropology student, had some of the same convictions, yet was more aware of the so-called "rounded" education he was receiving. This student believed that it was not necessarily the education that he valued but the social interactions and connections he is now apart of because of attending the University of Illinois. He argued that although a degree was something concrete that would come out of attending college and would most likely help him in future endeavors, friendships, which aren't concrete, were more important to him. A degree, he went on to say, does not take into account these friendships made and social webs weaved.

"A degree is what is emphasized in society, but it's the friendships that are more important."

This leads one to believe that although the University is helpful to this student, it is actually the social community created around the university is valued the most. This is another case of the University, knowingly or not, not being relevant to the student academically speaking. If, in this student's mind, academics are this under emphasized, then there is something amiss about the University's attempt to educate their students.

But is the University failing at its goals? Do they still achieve their

Mission and Vision Statements? My hypothesis argues that the University is failing its goals, missions and visions for its role in education. If there are two students or 40,000 that feel this way, either way one looks at it, the University is failing someone. "The University of Illinois will transform lives and serve society by educating, creating knowledge and putting knowledge to work on a large scale and with excellence." If one wants to serve society, look at what society wants and needs. Students need relevant curriculum that is worthwhile to study because it is applicable to their futures. The University may educate and create knowledge, but if it is not relevant to the wants and needs of its students there is no possible way to put it to work and certainly no way to put it to work "with excellence."

To study this hypothesis and turn this preliminary project into a long term undertaking much more intensive research is necessary. The interviews would have to increase to at least twenty. Follow-up interviews would be an added bonus, especially interviews that take place a year after graduation. This would allow the interviewee to test the job markets and see if his or her education really is put to use in the job world.

Focus groups would also be a nice addition to this project. They would provide a way for current and ex-students to bounce ideas off of each other and through group communication may come up with aspects that I had not previously considered.

I feel that surveys would be helpful. With these, I would be able to contact many people at once and gather many opinions. Once again, students' and ex-students' opinions would be valuable to gather ideas from inside and outside of academia.

Throughout my research, and perhaps in my final write-up, I would try to be reflexive as possible. I appreciate the reflexivity in other anthropological works and would not want to deprive others of learning from my mistakes, tricks, or triumphs.

Research Proposal: <!-- @page { size: 8.5in 11in; margin: 0.79in } P.sdfootnote { margin-left: 0.2in; text-indent: -0.2in; margin-bottom: 0in; font-size: 10pt } P { margin-bottom: 0.08in } A.sdfootnoteanc { font-size: 57% } -->

Abstract

This research aims to discover if students are receiving what they need out of a university education. I will study how students perceive the idea of university education in relation to relevance of life outside of university, that is the realm of the 'real world'. In essence, what are students getting out of university education in comparison to what higher education is trying to provide? After limited preliminary research I would hypothesize that today's university education does not truly educate students in areas relevant to their future. In general, students are learning, but they are not learning what universities and colleges may expect in terms of a "traditional" education.

Research Problem

For many years universities have been viewed as the pinnacle of education, a path to success in life and a career. Students have, for the most, part assumed these notions as facts. As Norman Fairclough would say, this is a value assumption of what is good or desirable in the world.¹ And, as always, assumptions need to be analyzed. Becker says, "How can we know and take account in our analyses of the most basic categories constraining our thought, when they are so 'normal' to us that we are unaware of them?"² The university has become like one of these 'normal' categories in life: it is unusual in most

cases that a high school student does not consider, or does not want to pursue, higher education. The idea has been ingrained upon most of western society. The argument then becomes, if students are attending these higher education facilities, are they receiving what higher education promises. The University provides a very broad and expansive statement on its goals and visions here: <http://www.uillinois.edu/about/mission.cfm>. The website states the University's mission, vision, and guiding values. These three things correspond to promises. The Mission Statement is this: "The University of Illinois will transform lives and serve society by educating, creating knowledge and putting knowledge to work on a large scale and with excellence." The University is stating "here is what we will do for our community, on both a local and global scale." These are promises of what the University will provide for its faculty, community, state, society, and of course, students. It is comparable to the University stating what it will provide to all those that are a part of it. The question pertaining to my research then becomes, "Are students receiving these promises and are these the promises that students need?" During my preliminary research interviews, I found that one student claimed attending the University of Illinois will help him in the future, it is not in the ways generally expected. "It's made me more organized. It's not about the work you do, it's about how you set deadlines and about how you motivate yourself." Throughout the interview, things such as grades and G.P.A. were stressed and deemed important to graduate and

get a job. But it was the idea that what one learned outside the University was more important than what was learned from within its walls. Another important item, relevance of curriculum, was discussed. The student felt that he would not find use for his years of education beside the degree it gave him. Is this what higher education is providing students with, a degree and that is all?

Proposed Research

Through my research I will aim to discover if higher education is indeed keeping its promises with its students. To discover this, questions such as, but not limited to, the following need to be asked: What is it that students need from higher education? What is it that these universities are offering? What does each side promise the other? Are they delivering? Are universities providing students with material they need to succeed? The education necessary to obtain jobs in their fields? Does higher education stimulate the motivation to continue learning in areas such as graduate school? To find answers to these questions, the undergraduate student body at the University of Illinois will become my subject and focus. An undergraduate student body is necessary because I want to examine how students see their relationship with higher education. In a semester of preliminary research I have seen varied ideas of higher education from students of different ages,

from different places, and different perceptions of the university. It is these kinds of subjects that will aid me in my research.

Methodologies

To answer the questions I have proposed interviews and focus groups will be the most valuable tools. The basis of my research will come from one on one interviews. While gently guiding conversation, my interviews will at the same time be open to spontaneous discussion because “the spontaneous exchange within an interview offers possibilities of freedom researchers and narrators alike.”³ This flexibility allows for discovery of new research questions as well as refinement of those already created. Also, interviews are good for probing conflicts within the interviewee. For example, Kathryn Anderson and Dana C. Jack theorize that interviews allow women to discuss how their life “may combine two separate, often conflicting, perspectives: one framed in concepts and values that reflect men's dominant position in culture, and one informed by the more immediate realities of a woman's personal experience.”⁴ This idea can be applied to the complexities of any power relationship and therefore that of a student's life as well. A student subscribes to the concepts and values that reflect higher education's dominant position in culture in addition to being informed by their own reality that higher education may not be of

any help to them. Pierre Bordieu's idea of emphasizing understanding the perspective of the subject will also be of methodological use. Unlike Bordieu, I will relate to my subjects in a way that does not "beg the question" or give interviewees a prompt to answer from. This relate-ability will instead be achieved through the common experience of studenthood in higher education between myself and the subject. Robert Weiss' idea of the "Interviewing Relationship" will also be of use in certain aspects. The Interviewing Relationship abides by, but is not limited to, the following; "the interviewer and the respondent will work together to produce information useful to the research project"; "the interviewer will define the areas of exploration and will monitor the quality of material"; "the respondent will provide observations, external and internal, accepting the interviewers guidance regarding topics and the kind of report that is needed,"; "the interviewer will be a privileged inquirer in the sense that the interviewer may ask for information the respondent would not normally generally make available," and "the interviewer will ensure... that the respondent will not be damaged or disadvantaged because of the respondent's participation in the interview" and will regard "the respondent's participation and communications as confidential information."⁵ I will also employ the use of linguistic markers in my interview. Markers are like keywords that a respondent uses to signify a deeper

meaning of something to his or herself. For example, in the statement “(Important event X) is a waste of time,” “a waste of time” is a marker because it is not what one would expect to hear in relation to an important event. Essentially markers are words or phrases that signal a counter-expectation to that of the interviewer. Analyzing these are of utmost importance in attempting to realize what an interviewer's preconceived notions about the interviewee are. Along the same lines, I will need to decompose “meaning” as identified by Dana Jack. Jack presents the idea to listen to meanings that are commonly accepted, such as a “good” wife, or a “good” education, and deconstruct them.⁶

I believe focus groups will be valuable support to data collected during interviews. Focus groups allow for the exchange of ideas and language between people of the same cultural cohort. For methodology on focus groups I will draw from Mary Marczak & Meg Sewell's online article “Using focus Groups for Evaluation.”⁷ Questions will be open ended (as with regular interviews) and the number of participants will not number more than seven. As with interviews, confidentiality will be kept.

Significance of Research

My research will have a significant impact on how students

construct the identities and perceptions of the university. The university will then be able to analyze itself, through these outside eyes, and make changes based on my research that will allow higher education to meet the needs of students. Imagine this research as an in depth customer evaluation. Higher education needs to better serve the student, its customer. With this important research, the university can do just that.

1 Fairclough, Norman. 2003. "Assumptions." In *Analyzing Discourse: textual Analysis for Social Research*. (London: Routledge). 55-56.

2 Becker, Howard S. 1998. "Tricks of the Trade: How to Think about Your Research While you are Doing It." (University of Chicago Press: Chicago). 83.

3 Stacey, Judith. 1991. "Can There Be A Feminist Ethnography?" In *Women's Worlds: The Feminist Practice of Oral History*, eds. Sherna Berger Gluck and Daphne Patai (New York: Routledge). 11.

4 Stacey, Judith. 1991. "Can There Be A Feminist Ethnography?" In *Women's Worlds: The Feminist Practice of Oral History*, eds. Sherna Berger Gluck and Daphne Patai (New York: Routledge). 11.

5 Weiss, Robert. 1994. Interviewing. In *Learning from Strangers: The Art and Method of Qualitative Interview Studies*. (New York: The Free Press). 65.

6 Anderson, Kathryn and Dana C. Jack. "Learning to Listen: Interview Techniques and Analyses." In *Women's Worlds: The Feminist Practice of Oral History*, eds. Sherna Berger Gluck

and *Daphne Patai*. (New York: Routledge).

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7Marczak, Mary & Meg Sewell. "Using Focus Groups for Evaluation." <http://ag.arizona.edu/fcs/cyfernet/cyfar/focus.htm>

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I found a paper in IDEALS that shares some relation to my topic of interest. The project I found asks the basic question of "What do you expect out of college?", focusing on the social aspect of university life. Essentially the researcher surveyed new students on their expectations of college and finds that their expectations are based on their parents', or other family member's, fondest memories or images of movies and television. Those surveyed recall that "People would talk about the fun things they did. My dad went home and he told me all about being chief and being in a frat and what U of I was like. My mom told me about being in a house and stuff. Everyone talked about their crazy stories. They made it sound like the greatest time and a lot of fun ."

Other quotes go on to say "I thought college would be a nonstop party" and "My dad told me about being a Fiji [a fraternity on his campus] and they stole an expensive oil painting from the Beta chapter. The Betas retaliated though by shooting their [the Fijis'] snow owl and killing it (the owl was their mascot). " The party

atmosphere as well as prank pulling and rebellion is constantly emphasized again and again among the researcher's survey results. Emphasis is also placed on Greek life. Stories include frats pulling pranks (or just plain crimes) on each other (such as the one above), and general ideas about college gleaned from *Animal House* and *Old School* are rampant.

So how does my project compare to this one? I'm not doing a survey, nor recounting the time I climbed the roof of Foellinger after the hardest, longest night of partying ever (I didn't, just an example). I believe the connection is made when both the aforementioned project and my own boil our research questions down to their very essence: What are you looking to get out of the University. While mine focuses a bit more on the boring, err, academic side, I believe both to be valuable in understanding the student – university relation.

<http://www.ideals.uiuc.edu/handle/2142/1310>

Reflect: I thought the overall experience of forming a research proposal guided by semester long research was valuable. Though the blanket guidelines and restrictions placed on our class by IRB may have affected others, my project did not have any compliance issues (as far as I know) and therefore I did not have a problem. I liked the online environment and except for a few buggy formatting issues I found it to be in good working condition. I also found it to be a good addition to class discussion since discussions online

were more focused on our research. somewhat unlike class discussions. I wholly endorse the idea of archiving. I know in ten years I will have different ideas from what I have now and I think it will be a valuable experience to look back on these ideas and see how far I've come and where it is that I came from.

Recommendation Based on my findings I have two recommendations for the
s: University of Illinois. First, allow individual majors to diversify their ranges of accepted classes and allow more interdisciplinary majors. This is already happening on a small scale. For example, the SESE (School of Earth, Society, and Environment) major incorporates several fields into one discipline. This will allow students to find interests without hurting their chances of graduating on time. Second, know that curriculum must be refreshed to mirror what is relevant in the current job market. Essentially, teach relevant material.