

2011

How Undergraduates Learn the Ropes

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Recommended Citation

Harper, Kenn, "How Undergraduates Learn the Ropes" (2011). *Upstate New York Science Librarians Conference*. 31.
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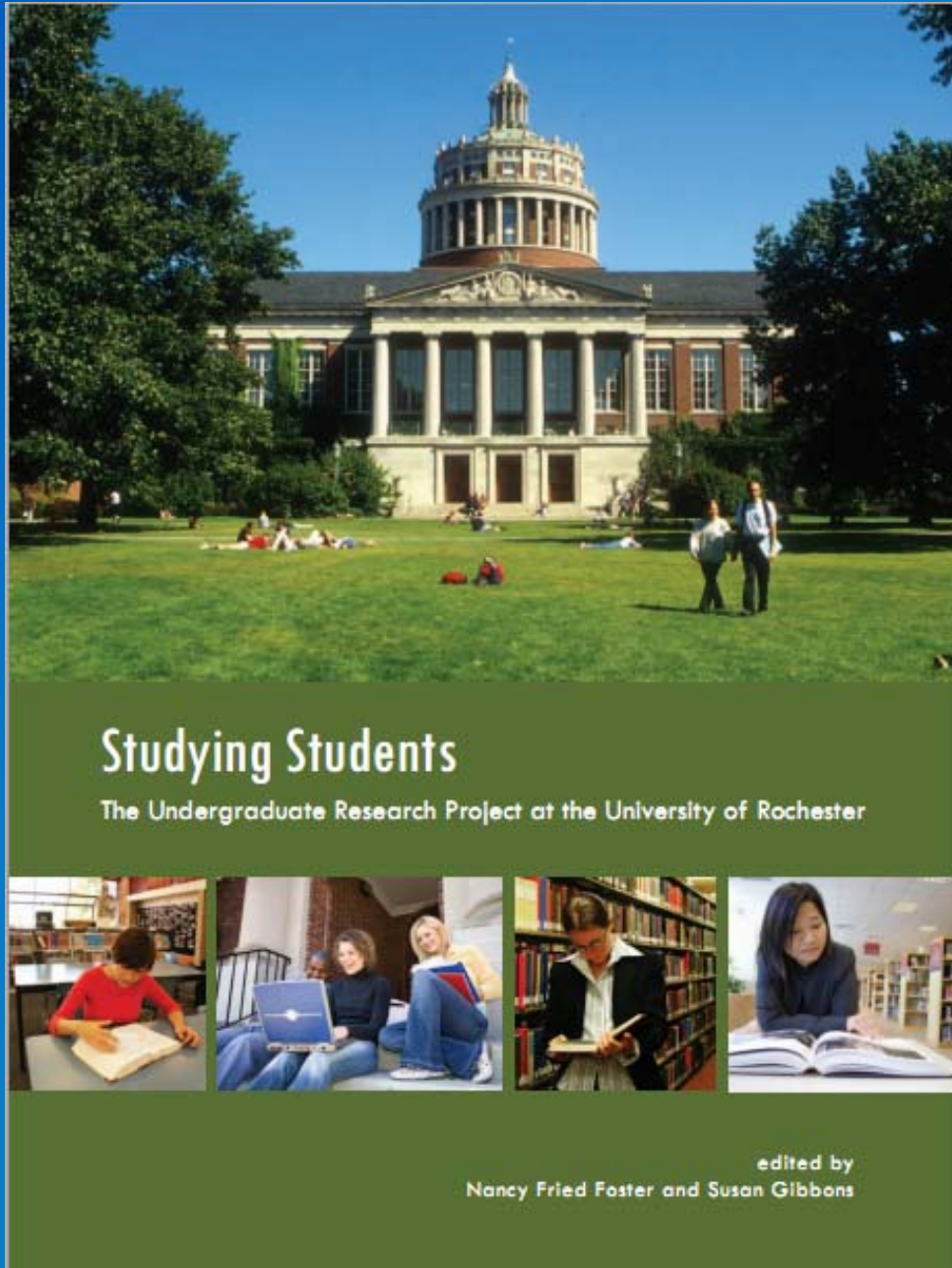
How Undergraduates Learn the Ropes

Kenn Harper

River Campus Libraries

University of Rochester

2005



2010

The Refresher Project

- How is trustworthy information found?
- Designing better spaces and technologies?
- Student usage of & needs for technology?
- How do student study groups work?
- Who are they and how do students learn the ropes?

The Learning the Ropes Team

- Nancy Foster – project coordinator
- Marcy Strong – team lead
- Vicki Burns
- Mari Lenoë
- Suzanne Bell
- Kenn Harper

What Do Students Need to Learn?

- What support is available
- Are there new expectations of college students
- How to balance academics and all the rest
- How and where to ask questions
- What to major in
- What is expected of them academically
- How to manage their new life

Three View Points

- Academic Advisors'
- Resident Advisors'
- Students' – All five years

Protocol Basics

- Interviewees read an information letter before commencing.
- All interviews were recorded
- There was an interview facilitator and one or more assistants
- Students were compensated with \$20
- Recordings were transcribed by students
- The Team meet to digest the information in the transcripts.

Interviews with Academic Advisors

- Four pre-major advisors – Library staff
- Four major advisors
 - Three faculty
 - One UR administrator
- One on one interviews.

Questions for Academic Advisors

- Can you give us a couple of examples of students who were “clueless” about their academic work? What happened? What was the consequence? What did the student learn?
- Can you give us a couple of examples of students who “figured college out”? What happened? What did the student learn? How was the student different afterwards?
- What have you learned about “clueless” students?
- What have you learned about students who have “figured college out”?

Interviews with Resident Advisors

- Interviewed 2 panels of five to seven (RAs)
- Names of interviewees provided by Director of Residential Life
- One facilitator and 3 assistances to conduct the interviews.

Questions for resident advisors

- What are the biggest obstacles that students encounter as entering freshmen?
- What has proven to be the best way to help these students, in your experience?
- Describe ways freshmen change going from first semester into second semester.
- What about the obstacles that returning students (sophomores, juniors) encounter? And the best ways to help them?
- How do the students figure out a sustainable balance between academic work and the rest of their campus lives?

- Tell us about students who you think do not make a good adjustment. Describe students who do.
- Do transfer students have special problems? What have you learned about good and bad transitions for transfer students?
- Based on your experiences in Residential Life, what would you say are the best things that faculty and staff could do to help students do well academically? How does this relate to students' lives in general?
- In what ways does the UR help students adjust to college life? Can you suggest other things that would be useful for the students?
- If you could give incoming freshmen one critical piece of advice, what would that be?

Interviews with Students

- Nine undergraduates
 - 2 freshmen, 2 sophomores, 2 juniors, 2 seniors
 - 1 take five
- Recruited at annual Halloween party and by a student assistant.
- One facilitator and one assistant interviewed individual students.
- 5 interviews where centered around photos, 4 where without photos

Student Photo Assignments

- Think of two things about the University of Rochester that used to be hard to impossible and now seems easy. Take pictures to represent both of these things.
- Think of two times that you were confused about some academic work or a resource you were using and then later “got it.” Take a picture to illustrate both times.
- Take a picture that captures something you want to become.

Questions for the Students

- Let's look at a picture of something that was hard to do but now seems easy. What's in this picture? What was hard? How did it become easy? (Repeat with next picture)
- Let's look at a picture of when you "got it." What happened? What did you learn? How did that happen? (Repeat for final picture) (Prompt: how have you changed as a student? What's different? When do you think this change happened? What contributed to it?)

- Can you tell us about two people who have made your adjustment to college life easier? (no photos for this question).
- Let's look at the picture that represents what you want to become. Tell me about this. (Prompt: are there any people who have provided an example to you, or who have helped you move toward what you want to become?)

Major Findings

- In general, we learned that the process of “learning the ropes” is one of maturation in four distinct but interrelated and mutually reinforcing categories.

Four Areas of Maturation

- **Academic:** developing a sustained academic focus along with academic skills essential to the college environment
- **Social:** developing skill and ease in dealing with procedural demands of campus and college life such as finding good places to study and managing time.

Four Areas of Maturation (cont.)

- **Physical** : managing personal physical and health needs such as getting enough sleep and managing stress and, in some cases, chronic treatment for illness.
- **Emotional** : managing academic and non-academic relationships, achieving self-awareness of personality and life circumstances

Academic maturity

- **Passion:** One faculty advisor noted that the university now attracts a higher quality of student and that he no longer has students who are lacking in intellectual ability, but rather contends with students who aren't motivated to do the work.
- **Critical Reading:** One student said, "I missed the point. I just did the entire reading, but I've missed it because I wasn't reading for that."

Academic maturity

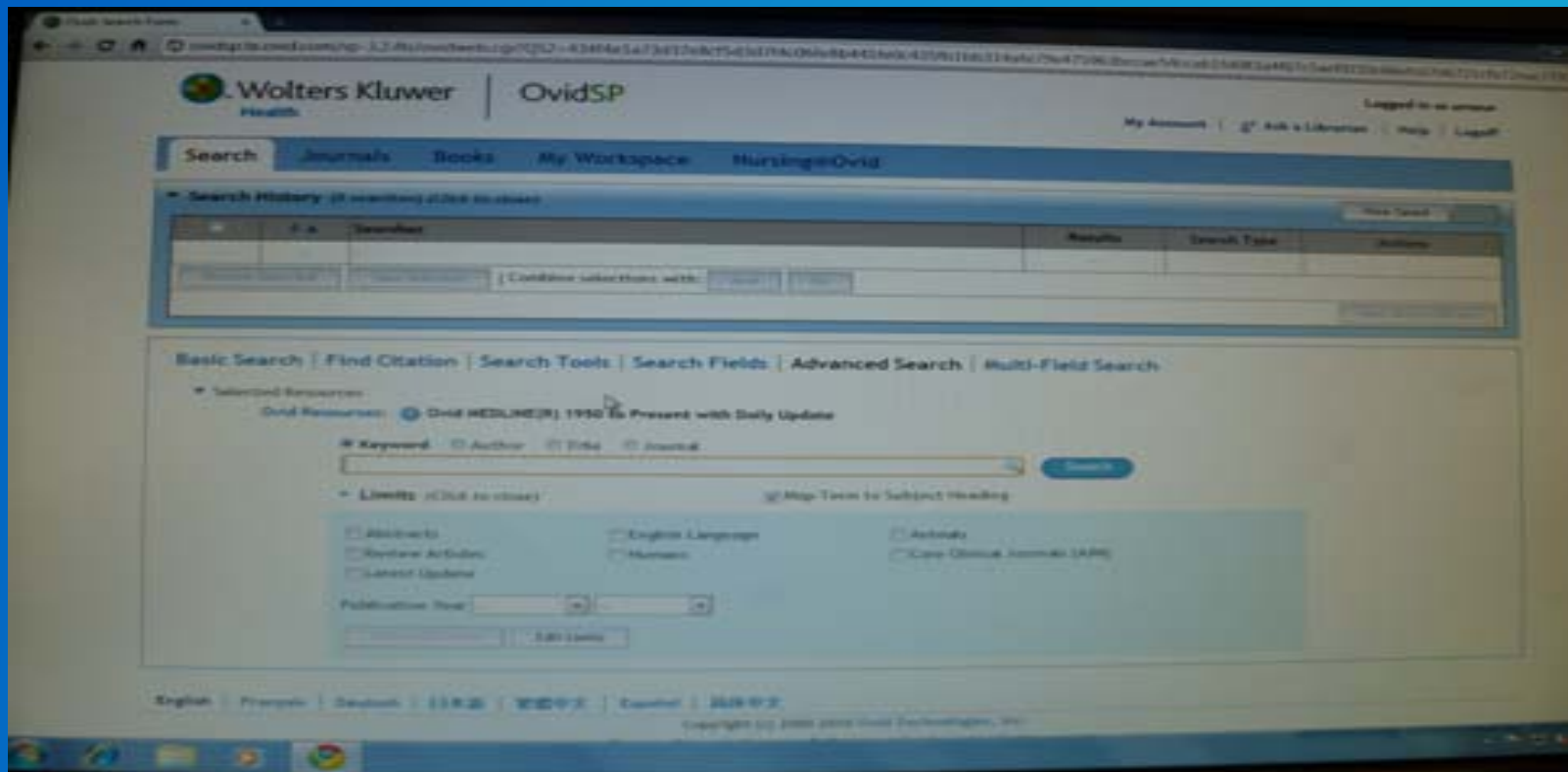
- **Working in groups:** One advisor observed that, “successful students often work together ... they have study groups informally or more formally and they just stick together and approach the material together and help each other.”
- **Seeking Faculty Help:** sometimes after receiving poor grades, the students began attending office hours or asking questions in class.

Academic Maturity

- **Overcome certain inhibitions:**
 - It was only after his conversation with a reference librarian that a student discovered WorldCat and the wonders of interlibrary loan
 - sometimes students hesitate to go into the Rush Rhees stacks because they find them intimidating or are put off by the building's confusing layout

Academic maturity

- Mastering certain skills:



Academic maturity

- **Taking advantage of UR services:**
 - Writing Center
 - Career Center
 - College Center for Academic Support:
Professional advisors, etc.
 - Office of Undergraduate Research

Social maturity

- **Daily lives – scheduling, problem solving, laundry:** “...my mom spoiled me, growing up. I’ll admit that. She definitely does a lot of things for me, that obviously, once I came here, she couldn’t do those things for me at all. So, I think, yeah, I had an adjustment.”
- **Finding the right study place:** Some students prefer to work in groups. Other students prefer to work alone and in quiet spaces where they won’t be distracted by their environments

Social maturity

- Time management :



Social maturity

- **Learning to explore:** Perhaps it is as simple as opening a door and discovering the tunnel system, or reading all of the words on the computer screen to discover that a useful resource is in plain sight.
- **Learning to ask the right question:** Asking “how do I put money on my ID card” was only part of the real question. It was only much later that she learned that she also needed to ask how to put scholarship money on her card.

Social maturity

- **Balancing Social Life:** “I thought it would be easier to join many clubs, and I realized that I can’t diversify, I can’t spread my time that easily. When I got here freshman year, I actually joined like ten or 11 clubs.”
- **Finding Role Models:**
 - Resident Advisors
 - Freshmen Fellows
 - D’Lions

Physical maturity

- Sleep
- Diet
- Stress
- Minor illness
- Chronic health issues

Emotional maturity

- **Changing course:** Half of the freshmen attending the University of Rochester declare at admission that they want to go to medical school. However, fewer than half actually do so
- **Dealing with expectations:** Part of the transformation into a college student and young adult is the ability to recognize one's own interests, make one's own decisions, and stand up for them

Emotional maturity

- **Becoming committed:**
 - The level and intensity of the work required at the University of Rochester are only sustainable if one is completely committed
 - Academic advisors noted that successful students develop discipline and become ready to apply themselves; how you can almost see the students change physically when they find something they are passionate about, and that you as the advisor now know that they have “got it”

Emotional maturity

- **Identity:**

- A student may need to achieve a greater degree of self-awareness and to negotiate his/her identity and goals with family members who have harbored different hopes.
- Very few students come in with the understanding of what it takes to make adjustments when the reality of their skills and interests no longer agrees with who they thought they were, and what they thought they would do

Emotional maturity

- **Openness to admitting the need for help**
 - A student's ability to approach and engage with an instructor seems to be a turning point in the road to academic success
 - Students and RAs all talk about how they frequently have a deep reluctance or even fear of consulting with their professors, especially when they are doing poorly or the class size is large

Emotional maturity

- **Dealing with intimidating people (faculty)**
 - One advisor thought that students do not want to appear weak in front of the faculty
 - Another advisor said that students may feel intellectually intimidated by their professors
 - One student said of professors that she had successfully interacted with “...they’re the nicest ever, and even now, they’re still intimidating

Emotional maturity

- **Making the Connection:**
 - One student said that he had intended to become a doctor but TA-ing for a faculty member in Biology had moved him toward wanting to be a researcher
 - Advisors described the bonds the students form with their role models and how it helps the students to figure out life on campus, and also life in general

Future Directions

- Sponsor talks in which interesting, eminent faculty members discuss what they do and how they found themselves intellectually.
- Display the work of visiting researchers and speakers and encourage students to attend events at which they can meet these people and learn about their work.
- Unashamedly highlight the intellectual-ness of the library and its quality as a place of serious – and exciting – scholarship.

Future Directions

- Create a partnership with academic advising and Residential Life so that advisors and RAs direct students to the librarians who are liaisons in their areas of interest.
- Keep doing what the library is doing, with increased emphasis on embedding research in the pursuit of personal intellectual interests.
- Provide more spaces that support spreading out and sticking around

Future Directions

- Hold more freshmen-level classes and TA-review sessions in the library, introducing students to different library spaces.
- Implement additional low-barrier, game-type orientation activities, such as a freshmen scavenger hunt.
- Collect and share stories of students who “learned the ropes.”
- Create subtle rewards for students who take the first step to ask for help.

Future Directions

- Help students talk to faculty members and university researchers, perhaps by sponsoring casual get-togethers.
- Equip staff to understand how intimidated students may be in their relationships with instructors and provide support and practical advice if they suspect that this is an issue.
- Explore a mentoring role for librarians, possibly in 100-level courses, where librarians play a role in easing the anxiety of students around not knowing how to begin to learn, to ask, and to connect.

Future Directions

- Provide and publicize different kinds of space for students whose physical development requires different types of accommodation