

# SEEING RESEARCH THROUGH YOUR FACULTY'S EYES: ETHNOGRAPHIC INTERVIEWING AS A RESEARCH TOOL

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## INTRODUCTION

What resources and services do faculty members need to be successful in their research? To determine this, two librarian researchers studied the participants in their own environment and then conveyed the findings from the perspective of the faculty member as analyzed by the interviewer. The librarian researchers are Carolyn Mills, Open Access & Authors Rights and Sciences Librarian; and Sharon Giovenale, Pharmacy Librarian. Carolyn liaises with most of the departments in the College of Agriculture, Health and Natural Resources (CAHNR). Sharon works with the Department of Nutritional Sciences.

UConn was part of a nineteen institution ethnographic study on the research practices and support needs of agriculture faculty, under the auspices of Ithaka S+R in 2016. The national study was sponsored by the United States Agricultural Information Network and the local study was funded by the University of Connecticut Library. The study examined the research practices of academics in CAHNR in order to determine what resources and services our agriculture faculty members need to be successful in their research. For the purposes of the study, agriculture was defined as research into the science and practice of farming, both crops and animals. Selected subjects were conducting active, grant funded research in some aspect of agriculture. Interviewees provided descriptions and personal insights about their research and how it relates to the broad field of agricultural scholarship. They spoke about their research methods and any related challenges, how they find information, disseminate their results, and archive their data. They also reflected on the future of agriculture research.

## METHODOLOGY

The research project required a protocol approved by the UConn IRB and completion of an online CITI Human Subjects Research Course. Ithaka S+R provided a webinar on sampling and recruitment practices and a two day training session in ethnographic methods at the University of Florida in April, 2016. The interview protocol was also provided by Ithaka S+R. Research subject volunteers were recruited via email invitations sent to the UConn researchers who met the study's definition of agricultural research. Nine researchers participated in semi-structured interviews, including five from the Department of Plant Science and four from the Department of Animal Science. The researchers held the following ranks:

Rank	Interviewed
Full Professor	3
Associate Professor	2
Assistant Professor	3
Extension Educator	1

The interviews were "semi-structured", meaning that each interview consisted of a set of 15 specific questions which could be elaborated on as conversational threads. The questions include the focus of research, individual research and dissemination practices, the current state of the field of agriculture and speculations on its future. Interviews were digitally recorded, transcribed and then coded separately by the each study team member. Then the study team looked for core themes and, together with the narratives of the researchers, the findings were discerned. Each librarian developed an initial set of findings and then mutually developed a plan for the final report.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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## BEST QUOTES WHICH ILLUMINATE THE RESEARCHERS' WORLDS

### About getting external funding

*"These days it's gotten harder and harder and you have to convince people that your project, as opposed to these nine out of ten other projects that are worthy of funding, why this one should be funded when they're all worth funding."*

### About lack of internal funding

*"Internal opportunities become much smaller, so that you almost have to find the external dollars but the external dollars are becoming more difficult to get. And even when you get them they're often times not enough to really do the experiment that you would really like to do. So sometimes you're cutting out variables, sometimes you're cutting out measurements, but there's always that compromise in what you get done for the amount of funding that you have."*

*"I really can't do the experiment until I get funded but I have to do half the experiment before I get funded so I have preliminary data. And it used to be that getting money to do that preliminary stuff was available, in-house or in some ways. That's drying up as well."*

### About finding research assistants

*"You're asking for support for a student from the funder, so if I was up against a place that funds that student, the cost of doing research isn't that high, my research is not that high but when you throw a student into it, it becomes extremely expensive. I've lost grants because they'll say 'You asked for \$120K for this fairly simple project.' But I need a student to do it. 'Oh, well we gave that project to so and so because they didn't ask for the student, they just asked for the supply money.'"*

### About the cyclical nature of literature reading

*"... Tends to be more when we're grant writing or we're writing a paper or when I've got a student that's interested in an area and needs some background or something. Then we'll do a lot of searching. But a lot of it is when we're writing, either for publication to make sure we're up to date on what's come out since we've started looking, or when we're putting together proposals for the next set."*

### About peer review journals

*"Ninety percent of what I respect, when I look at packets if I'm evaluating someone or someone's evaluating me, is the peer review standard research journal."*

### About where to publish

*"I think a lot of people shoot for the highest impact journal they can get published in. I don't do that ... [where he does publish] the journal as a whole might not get a lot of citations so its impact might be low, but the impact of my paper personally I feel is as high as it would have been if I put it anywhere."*

### About where they need help

*Writing help for non-native English speakers. "As a non-native English speaker I spend a lot of time writing manuscript and writing proposals ... I'm going to need four weeks' time to write but I'm most of the time, 75 percent of time, on the language side and one week of time on really scientific stuff ... If the College of Agriculture has one person to edit manuscript before sending out it will improve the productivity drastically, not only for non-native speakers, even for native speakers."*

### Keep up with the latest technological tools

*"There's more and more tools that you can use in biological research, in all scales and all fields ... I would say that in science these days having an ability to manage the tools that are available is pretty important."*

### Determining OA journal quality

*"The fact that there are just so many of these open access – 'who knows' journals. It's your favorite journal's name plus another word ... "*

### Data sharing requirements

*"I just don't know how it's applicable to my research. And [it] may be something I need to learn and need to know more since you have this question. It seems like we're supposed to know how."*

### About public perceptions of agriculture

*"In my field a lot of it is consumer perception, genetic engineering, a lot of our future is in genetic engineering and there's a lot of pushback from consumers and if you get that pushback I worry that the funding for some of this stuff is withheld because of the potential."*

*"There's got to be a balance between if this is how you want your animals raised and how you want the meat you purchase to be raised, that's fine ...-we need economical ways to produce protein for lots of people. And we have managed to do that with conventional agriculture in what I think is a humane way in most cases ... But it's trying to make that argument in a way that is heard by the general public and not the 'Monsanto pays your salary' because Monsanto sure doesn't pay my salary or even fund my research."*

*"We're going to die if we do not allow [genetic engineering of plants], if you look at developing countries. GMO products are very important in trade to feed the world."*

## WHAT DID WE LEARN FROM THIS EXPERIENCE DOING ETHNOGRAPHIC RESEARCH?

In this section we highlight what we learned as first time librarian researchers doing ethnographic research. We were both very impressed by the organization and professionalism of the Ithaka S+R group, and our IRB application for the project sailed through easily with the prepared documentation. You can read the actual research findings in the report, located at

[http://digitalcommons.uconn.edu/libr\\_pubs/57/](http://digitalcommons.uconn.edu/libr_pubs/57/)

### The research experience

- Conducting interviews using digital recorders, having that extra technology changes the interview experience both for the good (exact recordings give much more information than notes) and for bad (worry about technology failure gave an extra layer of concern.)
- Transcribing was tedious for Sharon but fascinating for Carolyn. It was hard work, requiring many hours of intensive focus, especially for recordings of the non-native English speaking subjects. But doing the transcription ourselves made sure that we learned the content thoroughly in a way simple reading would not have.
- Analysis was fun for Sharon but painful for Carolyn, who had difficulty using the proscribed analysis method and ended up inventing her own approach to analyzing the content to find patterns in the interview content.
- We learned that doing research with a partner gained us a variety of perspectives, someone to bounce ideas off of, and someone to not disappoint.

### Our researchers' worlds

- Although our subjects were all within the disciplines of either animal science or plant science, the breadth of research methodologies involved was striking, including techniques as diverse as gene expression versus agricultural field testing; microbial sampling versus organismal systematics, and genome editing versus taking physical samples from a cohort of large farm animals.
- We learned quite a lot about how research funding works and how it is the absolute center of all research aspects in the most fundamental ways. While we knew this intellectually prior to the project, hearing clear and compelling examples was educational.
- We learned about not only what the researchers did in their research but WHY they do it – how their topics fit into the bigger picture of agriculture. This made the research topics more relatable and understandable.
- We understand better now the impact of language barriers on non-native English speakers and the difficulties they go through in conducting their research, teaching and writing in a second language.
- We were impressed with how deeply these researchers care about the future of agriculture and hope that their research may help to improve science and society in the future.
- The difference between research perceptions of potentially controversial aspects of agriculture versus how the public perceives them.
- The difficulty of maintaining the business side of research, including administrating a lab with graduate students, getting grants, and monitoring and spending budgets using non-intuitive software.
- The importance of professional colleagues as networking information sources, both on campus and through professional societies.
- The constraints of money for students, research projects and outcomes, clarity & exposure to their worlds.
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