CHICAGO -- For a stranger, the main library at the University of Illinois at Chicago can be hard to find. The directions I got from a pair of clerks at the credit union in the student center have proven unreliable. I now find myself adrift among ash trees and drab geometric buildings.

Finally, I call for help. Firouzeh Logan, a reference librarian here, soon appears and guides me where I need to go. Several unmarked pathways and an escalator ride later, I am in a private room on the second floor of the library, surrounded by librarians eager to answer my questions.

Most students never make it this far.

This is one of the sobering truths these librarians, representing a group of Illinois universities, have learned over the course of a two-year, five-campus ethnographic study examining how students view and use their campus libraries: students rarely ask librarians for help, even when they need it. The idea of a librarian as an academic expert who is available to talk about assignments and hold their hands through the research process is, in fact, foreign to most students. Those who even have the word “librarian” in their vocabularies often think library staff are only good for pointing to different sections of the stacks.