The ERIAL (Ethnographic Research in Illinois Academic Libraries) project -- a series of studies conducted at Illinois Wesleyan, DePaul University, and Northeastern Illinois University, and the University of Illinois's Chicago and Springfield campuses -- was a meta-exercise for the librarians in practicing the sort of deep research they champion. Instead of relying on surveys, the libraries enlisted two anthropologists, along with their own staff members, to collect data using open-ended interviews and direct observation, among other methods.

The goal was to generate data that, rather than being statistically significant yet shallow, would provide deep, subjective accounts of what students, librarians and professors think of the library and each other at those five institutions. The resulting papers are scheduled to be published by the American Library Association this fall, under the title: "Libraries and Student Culture: What We Now Know."

One thing the librarians now know is that their students' research habits are worse than they thought.

At Illinois Wesleyan University, "The majority of students -- of all levels -- exhibited significant difficulties that ranged across nearly every aspect of the search process," according to researchers there. They tended to overuse Google and misuse scholarly databases. They preferred simple database searches to other methods of discovery, but generally exhibited "a lack of understanding of search logic" that often foiled their attempts to find good sources.

However, the researchers did not place the onus solely on students. Librarians and professors are also partially to blame for the gulf that has opened between students and the library employees who are supposed to help them, the ERIAL researchers say. Librarians tend to overestimate the research skills of some of their students, which can result in interactions that leave students feeling intimidated and alienated, say the ERIAL researchers. Some professors make similar assumptions, and fail to require that their students visit with a librarian before embarking on research projects. And both professors and librarians are liable to project an idealistic view of the research process onto students who often are not willing or able to fulfill it.

"If we quietly hope to convert all students to the liberal ideals of higher education, we may miss opportunities to connect with a pragmatic student body," wrote Mary Thill, a humanities librarian at Northeastern Illinois. "... By financial necessity, many of today's students have limited time to devote to their research." Showing students the pool and then shoving them into the deep end is more likely to foster despair than self-reliance, Thill wrote. "Now more than ever, academic librarians should seek to 'save time for the reader.'"

Before they can do that, of course, they will have to actually get students to ask for help. That means understanding why students are not asking for help and knowing what kind of help they need, say the librarians.

"This study has changed, profoundly, how I see my role at the university and my understanding of who our students are," says Lynda Duke, an academic outreach librarian at Illinois Wesleyan. "It's been life-changing, truly."