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## ABSTRACT

Returning students - those with a significant lapse in time during their formal education - make up a large and growing percentage of the student population at Portland State University (PSU). Over 40% of PSU undergraduates are over 26 years of age and 21% of graduate students over 39. Given returning students' experiences in the work force, motivations for learning, and the lapse of time since conducting academic research, returning students may approach research differently than traditional students. Despite the size of this student population at PSU and the growth of the returning student demographic in higher education, very little research has been conducted regarding these students' research habits and challenges. The goals of this research are to describe returning students' research habits and to identify potential improvements to library services and instruction for returning students at PSU.



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## RETURNING TO LEARN: RESEARCH AND THE PRODIGAL STUDENT

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Mixed-methods Ethnographic  
Research



**ALA ANNUAL 2013 POSTER  
SESSION HANDOUT**

# Methods

## PHOTO DIARIES

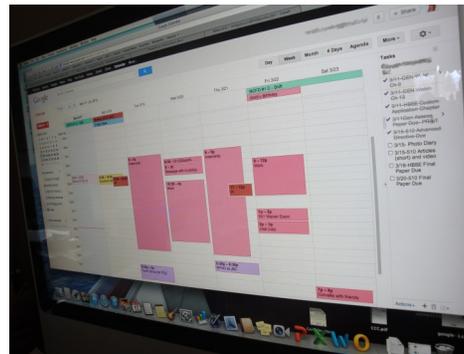
Students were asked to take photographs to document their research habits and research lives including:

- What you always bring with you to campus.
- The tools you use for writing assignments.
- A piece of technology you cannot live without.
- Study spots—on campus, at home, and favorites overall.
- How you keep track of your school schedule and organize your assignments.
- Where you go to get help with your assignments.
- Your favorite time of day to get work done.
- A study partner or study group (optional).
- Where you go to take a break and relax.
- Something that distracts you from studying.
- A picture of the place you most often do research, showing your computer.
- Your computer screen when you're at the place where you usually start your research online.
- A place in the library where you feel lost.
- The night before a big assignment is due.
- Something that keeps you sane when you're stressed with school work.

## RESEARCH JOURNALS

Students were asked to keep a research journal as it pertained to one research assignment throughout a single term. Specifically, we asked them to record:

- Where you gathered information,
- how you searched,
- what were the results,
- how much time you spent, and
- describe your feelings about the research session.



## FILMED RESEARCH PROCESS

Students were asked to conduct online research for a research assignment they have been assigned for their class that term. Their verbal narration of their research process, as well as their actions on the screen, were recorded using Camtasia for 20 minutes. They were not instructed to use any particular websites and began at the Google homepage so as not to show preference for the library website.

## FOCUS GROUPS

Two groups of returning students met with two facilitators (one student, one faculty) to discuss their experiences and challenges with research. They were specifically asked the following questions:

- Think back to a time when you've been given an assignment to write a research paper for class. How much time do you give yourself to do the project? Then how do you start that process and why do you start there?
- If how you start doesn't work, what do you do next?
- What is your biggest challenge in doing research?
- Think back to a time when you've been writing a research paper and you've gotten frustrated. What made you frustrated and why? What did you do to move past that?
- Think about a time when you've looked for help (from anyone) with a research project. Whom did you approach first and why?
- What do you feel makes you successful in your research? And unsuccessful?
- How much time do you estimate you spent on the assignment?
- Thinking back to your previous research experiences, what do you think you'll do differently the next time you're faced with a research paper assignment?
- Think back to a time where you felt you had success with a research experience. What was it and why do you think you were successful?