Digital Commons @ LMU and LLS

**Digital Commons@
Loyola Marymount University
and Loyola Law School**

LMU Librarian Publications & Presentations

William H. Hannon Library

10-1-2010

Rock the CASBAH: CalArts Student Behaviors and Habits

Jeffrey Gatten
Loyola Marymount University, jeffrey.gatten@lmu.edu

Mike Bryant

Rock the CASBAH: CalArts' Student Behaviors and Habits

Jeff Gatten and Mike Bryant

Adapting the qualitative methodologies from *Studying Students: The Undergraduate Research Project at the University of Rochester*, the CalArts' Student Behaviors and Habits (CASBAH) project undertook to learn more holistically about the behaviors of art school students. The research question was simply, "How do students in an artistic and nontraditional setting view and act on the process of discovery?" The study utilized faculty interviews, student interviews, poster surveys, photo surveys, online surveys, and focus groups. The authors learned that art students expect to create their own individualized information-seeking paradigm, one that will not impose an external artistic perspective and may be nonlinear.

[This article is based on a paper presented at the California Academic & Research Libraries Conference held April 8-10, 2010, in Sacramento, California.]

Introduction

California Institute of the Arts (CalArts) is the nation's first art institute to offer BFAs and MFAs in both the visual and performing arts. CalArts is dedicated to training and nurturing the next generation of professional artists, fostering brilliance and innovation within the broadest context possible. Emphasis is placed on new and experimental work, and students are admitted solely on the basis of artistic ability.[1]

The above description immediately alerts the reader to the fact that CalArts, like many art colleges, is not a typical institution of higher education. While the artistic talents among the student body are world class, the academic skills are much more wide-ranging. This creates unique challenges for those dedicated to maximizing the educational experience and ensuring scholastic success, such as the Student Affairs Office, the Provost's Office, the Teaching and Learning Center, and the Division of Library and Information Resources. It is within this context that these four units jointly undertook a comprehensive approach to better understanding what makes the students tick academically.

The existing literature supports the concept of art school students operating differently than traditional college students when approaching a research project. Alessia Zanin-Yost and Erin Tapley note that art students do not think of library research as being compatible with the creative process.[2] Polly Frank shares observations on how this is manifested in terms of actual library use.[3] Aniko Halverson discusses the implications for library instruction.[4] Hannah Bennett claims that art students "do not regard the library as logically fitting into their studio projects or coursework, and as a result do not recognize their own valid and extremely challenging research needs."[5] The underlying question of why this is the case may have to do with feelings and actions being more important than thoughts during certain stages of the information-seeking process.[6]

The authors' goal was to find a means of discovering specific feelings and actions regarding the library research process. The CalArts' Student Behaviors and Habits (CASBAH) project, implemented in the spring of 2009, drew its inspiration from the widely publicized and discussed report *Studying Students: The Undergraduate Research Project at the University of Rochester*.[7] The "Rochester study" made use of a number of "anthropological and ethnographic methods to examine how undergraduate students write their research papers."[8] Their purpose in utilizing these fairly uncommon methods for library studies was to better understand how students make use of

their time and space, with the long-term goal of designing library services and facilities to better align with actual student behaviors. Borrowing and adapting some of the qualitative methodologies used in the Rochester study, CalArts undertook the challenge of learning more holistically about the information-seeking behaviors of art school students. The authors decided a qualitative approach would best serve as a starting point for building an investigative framework that could be further substantiated later through quantitative methodologies. The research question was simply, "How do students in an artistic and nontraditional setting view and act on the process of discovery?" We expected to gain some interesting insights, given the nonlinear approach to experiencing the world as already exhibited daily by the community of artists.

The University of Rochester and CalArts Approaches

Here is how the authors adapted, and differed from, the Rochester study methodologies in order to serve our research needs.

Methods	University of Rochester	CalArts
Faculty interviews	X	X
Student interviews	X	X
Pilot services	X	
Poster surveys		X
Student-drawn library designs	X	X
Website workshops	X	
Photo surveys	X	X
Mapping diaries	X	
Online student survey		X

Faculty Interviews

The key to understanding student success is to first understand how success is measured by those positioned to make such judgments—i.e., the faculty. Librarians interviewed twenty faculty members representing all six of the CalArts schools (Art, Critical Studies, Dance, Film/Video, Music, and Theater). Faculty were selected based on their practices of making assignments which typically require some information-seeking activity. Each instructor was asked the same series of questions, based generally on the faculty interview queries from the Rochester study. The goal was to discover faculty members' thinking behind the assignments they make and their expectations for the final products their students produce. Below are collective summaries of the responses to each question, reflecting the common ground.

How would you define "research?"

Research is an associative process of gathering and synthesizing information in order to create a contextualization. Research is looking outside one's own artistic work, including the work of others, the relevant associated historical developments, and various critical theories through time.

Describe the attributes of a good research paper (or research on an art-making project).

A clear sense of a personal point of view permeates with a multi-layered subject comprehension. There is a demonstrated ability to synthesize information dialectally from a variety of sources and the student's own interpretations. Represented is a collection of possibilities that inspire, enlighten, clarify, and provide clear implications. All art-making is a research process, rarely linear.

How do you expect students to go about finding information and/or resources for doing research for a paper or an art-making project?

Dialogue with the course instructor is primary in pointing students in the right directions. The Internet (e.g., Wikipedia, Google Scholar) is a good resource from which to start, but it needs to be followed with library resources. Successful students are aggressive, and conversations—with the instructor, librarians, other faculty, students, artists, interesting people, and experts—are important. Students have to vocalize and to listen.

Do you expect students to seek out help in their research process? From whom and why?

Students need to start with their instructors who will point them to others, such as librarians or experts in the field. However, students need to discover their own individual processes for discovering and integrating knowledge.

What makes it difficult for students to complete a research project?

Artistic students do not want to be influenced by the ideas of others. There is a stigma connected with associating research with creativity. They think it will ruin the purity of their own ideas or, at the least, overwhelm to the point of losing their original ideas. Students are intuitive and do not think in terms of time management and logical steps. They are overcommitted, and academic exercises become a lower priority.

How can librarians be more helpful to students during their research stage?

Librarians are a great resource, but student employees at the circulation desk need to be better trained since they are typically the first point of contact. Personal interactions between librarians and students are valued. Librarians can be more useful to their artistic constituency by thinking and operating in a stream of consciousness, relying on their intuition and being playful with the ideas that students present to them.

What else do you think would be useful for us to know?

With our overextended students it will always be easier for them to get information on something rather than to experience it. The library can help students experience the information-seeking process.

Student Interviews

As a counterpoint to the faculty interviews, ten volunteer students representing four of the six CalArts schools (Art, Dance, Film/Video, and Theater) were interviewed regarding a major paper/project they were pursuing for a class that semester. Volunteers were paid ten dollars each for twenty minutes of their time. Interviews were conducted by the

dean of library and information resources, the director of the Teaching and Learning Center, and the assistant provost for academic affairs. The interviews were videotaped to provide illustrative snippets during presentations of the results, and each student was asked the same series of questions. Again, questions were inspired by the ones used in Rochester study. Below are summations of the responses to each key question.

What is the topic of your paper/project?

The topics included animation history, an annotated bibliography on a dancer, a long-term installation project, the history and theory of aesthetics, dreams, a short film for an outside agency (group project), a series of short stories, the application of a myth to contemporary culture, and the history of Pixar and John Lasseter.

How well do you think you are going to do?

Only one student was not confident of doing well on the project, indicating that her opinion changes as she works on it. All others thought they would do well. Those that qualified their response did so by emphasizing they would be accomplishing their personal goals (if not those of their instructors).

What is the importance of the assignment to you?

Most students indicated they were very interested in their topics (e.g., "It's a story I'm interested in telling"), but typically it was just one assignment among many at the moment. For example, "It's pretty important, but I have a lot of other projects I'm working on" and "It's the one major paper I have to write for this class, but it is not personally or professionally important."

Are you finding the information, resources, and/or background materials fairly easily?

All students said finding what they needed is fairly easy. The Internet and YouTube, followed by library resources, were the most often indicated sources of their information.

Is there anything slowing you down or making it difficult to complete the paper/project?

Mirroring the responses from faculty members, students claimed time and priority of other assignments as the major roadblocks. Other responses included funding and the problem of finding information about very current contemporary art and artists.

Who do you think would be most helpful to you for finding the information, resources, and/or background materials for your paper/project?

Again reflecting the views of the faculty, the course instructor is seen as the primary person from whom to seek guidance. One student said he would first contact the instructor and hope to be then directed to other persons, adding "I'm not really someone to use the Internet, at all, actually."

Have you asked anyone to help you find the information, resources, and/or background materials?

Responses ranged from the course instructor to technical experts, and from classmates to "my older sister." No one indicated having contacted a librarian.

How would you prefer to communicate with someone to ask for their help?

The CalArts students that were interviewed overwhelmingly favor face-to-face (i.e., non-written) communication, even though most of them use online social networking tools, such as Facebook and/or MySpace and text messaging.

Have you thought of talking to a librarian?

Half of the students answered simply, "No." The rest qualified their responses by saying they had talked with the circulation desk staff for help finding books on the shelves. Only a couple of respondents mentioned a librarian by name.

Student Interviews – Round Two

Towards the end of the semester in which the students were interviewed, the authors asked the same students some follow-up questions. Here is a sampling of their responses.

Overall, how did the process of completing the paper/project go for you?

"Very well. I was short on time but that was my own fault, and I think just because of my working habits" and "Well, I turned in the paper on time, and it was work I was proud of."

Are you and the instructor in agreement on the quality of the final paper/project?

"I am almost never surprised" and "I backed up everything thoroughly with statistics, which was a new strategy for me."

Do you think your grade was influenced by the quantity of the information, resources, and/or background materials you were able to find?

"My biggest problem was fabricating an argument out of thin air and supporting it instead of researching first and then making an argument out of it. I probably should have done that" and "I think our grade mainly reflected the work and passion for the project."

Do you think your grade was influenced by the quality of the information, resources, and/or background materials you were able to find?

"Yes, the amount of sources is outweighed by the quality of the information. You can't just write a research paper using blogs and fliers!"

Poster Surveys

On random days throughout the semester, the authors placed posters in high traffic areas throughout the library. Attached to each poster was a pencil on a long string. On each poster were three questions, and students were invited to write anonymously their responses underneath each question. Here are the results.

Why did you come to the library today?

Twenty-two respondents (43 percent) visited the library to read or study. Twenty-one respondents (41 percent) came to the library to make use of technology for purposes not directly related to research (e.g., to use computers for printing and checking e-mail, to make photocopies). Eight (16 percent) came to do research.

What do you like about the library?

Twenty-four (42 percent) students wrote that they liked the environment. Fourteen (25 percent) noted the technology, especially free printing. Twelve (21 percent) indicated the library's collections. Four (12 percent) respondents liked the staff/services.

What would make the library better for you?

Thirty-two (60 percent) students indicated they wanted more and better technology (computers, printers, photo-copiers). Ten (19 percent) wanted to see improvements with staff/services (e.g., more hours). Nine (17 percent) thought the physical environment could be improved (e.g., better lighting). Two people (4 percent) suggested additional collections (e.g., video games).

Student-Drawn Library Designs

The physical layout of the CalArts library is more a result of utilizing available spaces as needed rather than a long-range facilities plan. Certain conditions, such as sharing the same building with all other offices and programs at CalArts, have resulted in the library being carved out of nearly disjointed spaces over the years as the number of library collections and services have grown to accommodate an increasing student enrollment. The authors wanted to step back and imagine the ideal layout for the library so any future modifications would be part of a larger coherent plan. With the goal of better understanding students' desired uses of library spaces, the authors invited random students to work in small groups of two or three persons each and to draw the ideal library layout. Students were each paid ten dollars for forty-five minutes of their time. The specific task was again similar to the Rochester study: students were asked to imagine a large empty space they could fill in any way they wished as long as the result was a library where they would love to spend time. The result was nine different drawings with some interesting common themes.

Currently, the library has one computer lab with eighteen computers, a printer, and a scanner. Many students rely on this equipment as their sole computing technology. However, sometimes the library's computer lab is unavailable because it is being used for seminars or library instruction sessions. It is not surprising then that the students' most often-drawn new feature was a second computer lab that would be dedicated to just walk-in use by students. Another frequent invention was an outdoor seating area. The current reading area has a glass wall with a view to a large planter filled with trees and bushes. Students want to capture the outdoor space surrounding the planter as an extension of the reading area, a place to be "outside" yet still "in the library."

The current lack of group study space and a dedicated quiet study area were also highlighted. Finally, two other common themes emerged. First, there is the need for restrooms located inside the library (currently there are none). Students do not want to pack up everything they've been working on or risk theft just to exit the library and walk down the hallway to the restrooms. Second, a café housed in the library was desired by more than one group.

Photo Surveys

Wanting to view the CalArts experience from the student's perspective, the authors were intrigued by the photo survey conducted for the Rochester study and adopted a similar methodology. We also asked students to take a series of photographs using disposable cameras. The list of prescribed photographic subjects was initially based on the Rochester study, but with some modifications to better suit needs in our environment and based on data already collected as part of the CASBAH project. Participants were volunteers from the previous student interview sessions and were paid twenty dollars each to take up to twenty-one photos over a seven-day period. Seven students completed the assignment.

Rather than interview each student about the photos as was the case in the Rochester study, we gathered together library staff members and representatives from the Provost's Office to collectively view the photos and write down observations. The following descriptions represent the common themes noted by this group for each of the prescribed photographic subjects.

One picture to best represent the library to a new student

Observations: The photographs focus more on library signage, spaces, and computing technology and less on library collections.

The computer you use most often, showing its surroundings

Observations: The majority of photographs show student-owned laptops either in their dorm rooms or studio spaces. Both locations are disorganized, cramped, and tight spaces. Only one photograph showed a library-owned computer.

All of the materials together that you bring to classes

Observations: There is a noticeable absence of cell phones and laptops. Notebooks are well represented.

All the stuff you always carry with you

Observations: All photographs show cell phones, keys, and something to write either on or with. A number of photographs include cigarettes.

Something you can't live without

Observations: These tended to be more personal objects along the line of comfort objects. There were no photographs of current technology devices, such as computers or cell phones.

Where you spend most of your time

Observations: All of the photographs were taken on campus, mostly showing studio or dorm spaces. None of the photographs were taken in the library.

Your favorite place to study

Observations: The library seems to be only one of several locations. There are many pictures of dorm rooms.

Your second favorite place to study

Observations: One photograph of the library and two of outdoor spaces. The remaining photographs are studio and dorm spaces.

Someone, other than yourself, doing research

Observations: Research is seen as a social activity and almost always involves using a computer. There are no photographs of student-staff interactions.

Your favorite thing in a library

Observations: Focus is on library spaces, specifically seating areas. There are a couple of photographs of the collections and one photograph of a library staff member.

An interior picture of where you live

Observations: Photographs mostly show messy and disorganized spaces.

How you keep organized

Observations: We were surprised to see how many of the photographs show paper-filled notebooks/planners. Very little technology was represented in these photos.

A place in the CalArts Library that is confusing to you

Observations: Some of the organizing systems in the library appear to be confusing to students. The Web site and call numbers are shown in several of the photographs.

The most frustrating location at CalArts

Observations: Almost all of the pictures were of administrative offices with which students need to interact (e.g., the Registrar's Office)

Your favorite location at CalArts

Observations: Artmaking spaces and outdoor spaces are predominant. Two of the photographs were taken in the library.

Some other photographic subjects that were assigned included topics to make the task more interesting for the student participants. These included "something weird," "something you've noticed that you think others don't notice," "your favorite part of the day," and "something you would call outdated."

Online Student Survey

All currently enrolled students, regardless of degree or year level, were invited via e-mail to take an online survey about the library. This is the one area of the CASBAH study where the authors employed a quantitative tool in order to generate some baseline data. On May 5, 2009, the first invitation was sent with an embedded link to a SurveyMonkey questionnaire. This initial invitation to take the survey yielded ninety-one responses. To encourage as many students as possible to complete the survey, a reminder e-mail was sent on May 11, 2009, also with a link to the survey. The second survey was identical to the first but had an added question that allowed students to identify whether they had already taken the survey in the previous week. This was done because the survey was anonymous and therefore duplicate responders could not be identified directly. The second survey yielded forty-one responses. A total of 111 responses were ultimately available for analysis, representing approximately 8 percent of the total student body. Undergraduate (BFA and Certificate) students comprised 54 percent (n=60) of the respondents.

Graduate students (MFA, MA, and Advanced Certificate) students made up the remaining 46 percent (n = 51). Following are some results from the survey.

Where do students do their school work?

Students were asked to rate how often they did schoolwork in library, their home or dormitory, their studio and the cafeteria or student lounge. Differences between undergraduates and graduates were not significant except that graduate students were more likely to do school work in the cafeteria or student lounge (P = 0.0039) (Figure 1). The authors found no significant differences among students from different disciplines in their use of their home or dormitory (P=0.7857) or in their use of the library (P=0.4793).
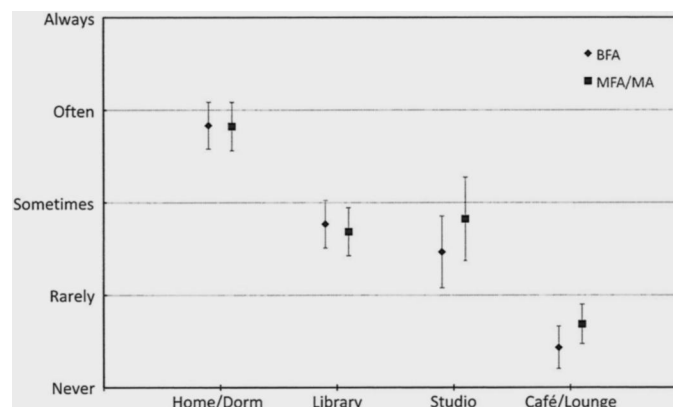

Figure 1. Where CalArts students do their schoolwork. Symbols represent means ± 2SE. Means were calculated by converting the Likert items as follows: Always = 4, Often = 3, Sometimes = 2, Rarely = 1, and Never = 0.

How often do you use library resources for your school work?

The authors found no significant differences between graduate and undergraduate students and their use of the following library resources: books, magazines or journals, artists' books, scores, audio recordings, or Web resources. Significant differences were discovered between these groups in the uses of videos and film (P=.0457), images (P=.0371) and exhibition catalogs (P=.0117) (Figure 2). As would be expected, significant differences do exist among the disciplines with regard to use of the following library resources: artists books (P=.0001), scores (P< .0001), videos and film (P=.0304), audio recordings (P=.0039), and exhibition catalogs (P=.0002).

How helpful are various persons?

Students were asked to rate the helpfulness of the following persons with regard to finding the information, resources, and/or background materials for their papers and/or projects: course instructor, mentor (i.e., faculty advisor), other faculty member, librarian, classmate. There were no significant differences either between graduate and undergraduate students or among students from various disciplines (Figure 3).

Open-ended comments

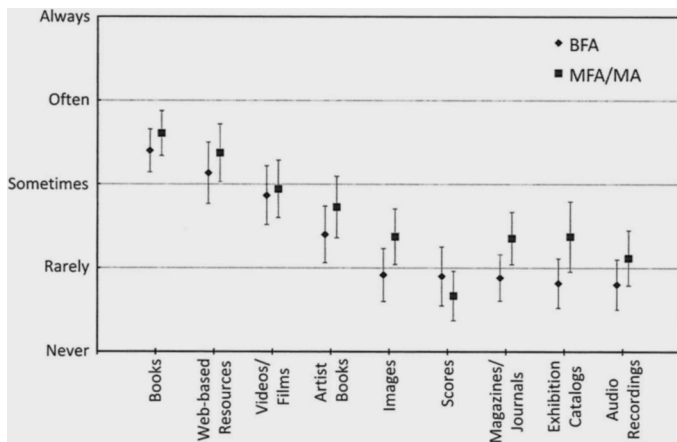The online survey included two optional open-ended questions: a) Is there anything else you would like to say about

Figure 2. Which library resources do CalArts students use for their school-work. Symbols represent means ± 2SE. Means were calculated by converting the Likert items as follows: Always = 4, Often = 3, Sometimes = 2, Rarely = 1, and Never = 0.
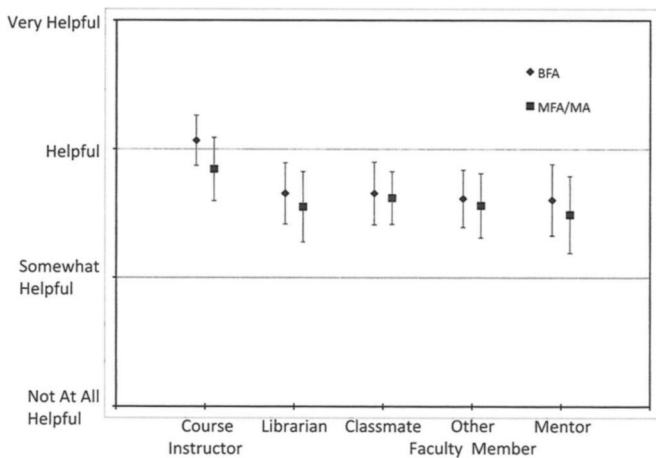

Figure 3. Who do CalArts students think are most helpful for finding information do their school work. Symbols represent means ± 2SE. Means were calculated by converting the Likert items as follows: Very Helpful = 3, Helpful = 2, Somewhat Helpful = 1, and Not At All Helpful = 0.

the Library? and b) Is there anything else you would like to say about studying or research here at CalArts? For purposes of analysis, the responses were categorized as follows, with sixty-seven persons providing comments on one or more subjects for a total of ninety-five discrete comments.

SUBJECT	Total
COLLECTIONS	23
SERVICES	23
FACILITIES	17
TECHNOLOGY	16
MISCELLANEOUS	16
Total	95

Collections

Remarks regarding the library collections generally centered on a desire to have more up-to-date books, for the library to allow the circulation of the video collections, and to do something about the "missing" items (i.e., books listed in the catalog as being available, but then not found on the shelves). Online resources (e.g., licensed databases) received favorable comments.

Services

Comments on the library's services focused mostly on the desire for extended hours of operation, especially on the weekends. Library staff and librarians were viewed as helpful, but several persons noted that the library's student employees appear not to be trained very well. Miscellaneous remarks mentioned the efficient interlibrary loan service, the need for library meeting rooms, and one student suggested the library "send an e-mail saying that the books are ABOUT to be overdue instead of one that says past due." Other comments:

"I think that the permanent library employees and directors are incredibly helpful, courteous, and warm. For my entire three years I have always been treated well and respectfully. I think it is managed quite well and proficiently." (Theater – MFA)

"The Library is awesome. I wish the students that worked there knew more about what was going on because they usually don't. Having student workers in the library is a great thing and I don't think that should ever stop. The training should be more thorough though." (Music – BFA2)

Facilities

Students want a library with more comfortable seating and a quieter atmosphere. The authors received a number of observations indicating that the library is a difficult place to study "because there are often students [and] library staff speaking to each other at full volume." Although there is an official ban on using cell phones in the library, we were informed that many students disregard this policy. One student indicated "we should be able to bring our animals into it [library]."

"More areas for quiet discussion and more areas for silent reading—sometimes there is too much of a mash-up and neither can be done comfortably." (Critical Studies – MFA)

Technology

Many students at CalArts depend upon the availability of computers and printers in the library. All of the comments regarding library technology were directed at the need for newer computers with a wider variety of software and for higher quality and better maintained printers.

Summary

This study was designed to learn more about the students within the CalArts setting and not to make definitive statements about art students in general. Therefore, basing any conclusions on this qualitative research would be premature. However, the authors gained some knowledge about CalArts student behaviors, and the methodologies used here may be of value to other art school libraries.

Students at CalArts expect to create their own information-seeking paradigm, one that will not impose an external artistic perspective and may be nonlinear. The students are very much social beings and see the research process in the same way. Personal interaction is an important component of research and should inform library planning. On the other hand, the limited availability of indoor spaces on campus may be contributing to students spending more time in their often cramped dorm rooms and studios for academic activities and less in social spaces. Does this then negatively affect their scholastics? Students clearly view the library as a destination place. To them, the library is a social space, a study space, a resources space, and a technology space; in other words, a hub. This study clearly revealed that the starting point for the library to be able to engage with students within this hub is to first build relationships with the faculty.

The atypical nature of CalArts and the student body means that the library needs to chart its own course for supporting and enhancing their learning experience. Libraries are typically organized around the expectation of users following standard information-seeking methodologies. Using a multifaceted approach to discover how students in an artistic and nontraditional higher education setting view and act on the process of discovery has provided the authors with a wealth of initial information. These riches are already starting to provide the framework and focus necessary for further exploration that can inform both strategic and long-range planning. Moreover, areas for immediate attention have clearly surfaced. Interestingly, while the CalArts students may approach the research task in unique ways, their conceptual view of the library is actually quite similar to that of students at traditional colleges.[9]

The next step will be to develop instruments for measuring the findings reported here against the larger student population at CalArts. By exploring the question of how students in an artistic and nontraditional setting view and act on the process of discovery, the goal is to determine priorities for developing a comprehensive program aimed at meeting the needs of, and enriching the academic experiences for, all of the artists/students.

Notes

1. CalArts Web site, http://calarts.edu/aboutcalarts (accessed August 26, 2009).

2. Alessia Zanin-Yost and Erin Tapley, "Learning in the Art Classroom: Making the Connection Between Research and Art," *Art Documentation* 27, no. 2 (Fall 2008): 40-45.

3. Polly Frank, "Student Artists in the Library: An Investigation of How They Use General Academic Libraries for Their Creative Needs," *The Journal of Academic Librarianship* 25, no. 6 (November 1999): 445-55.

4. Aniko Halverson, "Confronting Information Literacy in an Academic Arts Library," *Art Documentation* 27, no. 2 (Fall 2008): 34-38.

5. Hannah Bennett, "Bringing the Studio into the Library: Addressing the Research Needs of Studio Art and Architecture Students," *Art Documentation* 25, no. 1 (Spring 2006): 38-42.

6. Yungrang Cheng, "Thoughts, Feelings, and Actions: Quantitative Comparisons of Interactions and Relationships Among Three Factors in College Students' Information Seeking," *College & Research Libraries News* 66, no. 1 (January 2005): 7.

7. Nancy Fried Foster and Susan Gibbons, eds., *Studying Students: The Undergraduate Research Project at the University of Rochester* (Chicago: Association of College and Research Libraries, 2007).

8. Ibid., p. v.

9. Barbara Fister, "The Glorious Study Hall: How Libraries Nurture a Life of the Mind," *Library Issues: Briefings for Faculty and Administrators* 30, no. 2 (November 2009), http://www.libraryissues.com.

Jeff Gatten,
Dean, Library and Information Resources,
California Institute of the Arts,
Valencia, California,
jgatten@calarts.edu

Mike Bryant,
Faculty, School of Critical Studies,
Assistant Dean and Director, Teaching and Learning Center,
California Institute of the Arts,
Valencia, California,
mbryant@calarts.edu