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Rock the CASBAH (CalArts Student Behaviors and Habits)

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Abstract

Adapting the qualitative methodologies from *Studying Students: The Undergraduate Research Project at the University of Rochester* (Foster & Gibbons, 2007), the CalArts Student Behaviors and Habits (CASBAH) project undertook to learn holistically about the behaviors of art school students. Our research question was, “How do students in an artistic and nontraditional setting view and act on the process of discovery?” The CASBAH study utilized faculty interviews, student interviews, poster surveys, photo surveys, online surveys, and focus groups. We learned our students at CalArts expect to create their own individualized information-seeking paradigm, one that will not impose an external artistic perspective and may be nonlinear.

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. (“About CalArts,” 2009)

This description immediately alerts one to the fact that CalArts is not a typical institution of higher education. While the artistic talents among the student body are world class, the academic skills are more wide-ranging. This creates unique challenges for those of us dedicated to maximizing the educational experience and ensuring scholastic success. It is within this context that we undertook a comprehensive approach to better understanding our students’ academic behaviors and habits.

The CalArts’ Student Behaviors and Habits (CASBAH) project, implemented in the spring of 2009, drew its inspiration from the widely publicized and discussed *Studying Students: The Undergraduate Research Project at the University of Rochester* (Foster & Gibbons, 2007) The “Rochester” study made use of a number of “anthropological and ethnographic methods to examine how undergraduate students write their research papers” (p. v). Adapting some of the same methodologies, CalArts undertook the challenge to learn holistically about the information-seeking behaviors of art school students. Our research question was, “How do students in an artistic and nontraditional setting view and act on the process of discovery?”

The University of Rochester and CalArts Approaches

This chart shows how we both borrowed and differed from the “Rochester” study methodologies.

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

Key to understanding student success is to first understand how success is measured by 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 to complete. 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 the thinking behind assignments and the expectations for the final products that students produce. Below are collective responses to each question, reflecting the common ground among the interviewed faculty members.

How would you define “research?”

Research is an associative process of gathering and synthesizing information in order to create a contextualization. Research is looking at the work of others, the relevant historical and social contexts, and critical theories.

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. The Internet (e.g., Wikipedia, Google Scholar) is a good resource to start from, but needs to be followed with library resources. Successful students are aggressive and conversations are important; with the instructor, librarians, other faculty, students, artists, interesting people, and experts.

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?

There is a stigma connected with associating research with creativity. Artistic students do not want to be influenced by the ideas of others. They think it will ruin the purity of their own ideas or, at the least, overwhelm to the point of losing their original ideas.

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 the first line of defense. 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 over-extended 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

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 working on for a class that semester. Volunteers were paid \$10 each for twenty minutes of their time. 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 selected key question.

How well do you think you are going to do?

Only one student was not confident of doing well on the project. Those that qualified their response did so by emphasizing they at least 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, but typically it was just one assignment among many at the moment. For example, “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.

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

The course instructor is seen as the primary person from whom to seek guidance.

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 students we interviewed overwhelmingly favor face-to-face (i.e., non-written) communication, even though most of them use online social networking tools 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. Only a couple of respondents mentioned a librarian by name.

Photo Surveys

Wanting to view the CalArts experience from the student’s perspective, we were intrigued by the photo survey conducted for the “Rochester” study. We, too, asked students to take a series of photographs using disposable cameras. Participants were paid \$20 each to take up to twenty-one photos over a seven day period. Seven students completed the assignment. The following represents the common themes noted by this group for selected photo subjects.

All the stuff you always carry with you

All photos show cellphones, keys, and something to write either on or with.

Something you can’t live without

These tended to be personal, comfort objects. There were no photos of current technology devices, such as computers or cellphones.

Someone, other than yourself, doing research

Research is seen as a social activity (i.e., more than one person) and almost always involves using a computer.

Your favorite thing in a library

Focus is on library spaces, specifically seating areas. There are a couple of photos of the collections and one photo of a library staff member.

An interior picture of where you live

Photos mostly show messy and disorganized spaces without much warmth.

How you keep organized

Many of the photos show paper-filled notebooks/planners. Very little technology represented in these photos.

The most frustrating location at CalArts

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

Your favorite location at CalArts

Artmaking spaces and outdoor spaces are predominant. Two of the photos were taken in the library.

Poster Surveys

On random days throughout the semester, we placed posters throughout the library. 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%) visited the library to read or study. Twenty-one respondents (41%) came to the library to print papers, checking e-mail, or to make photocopies. Eight (16%) came to do research.

What do you like about the library?

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

What would make the library better for you?

Thirty-two (60%) indicated wanting more and better technology (e.g., computers, printer, photocopyers). Ten (19%) wanted to see improvements with staff/services (e.g., more hours). Nine (17%) thought the environment could be improved (e.g., better lighting). Two (4%) person suggested additional collections (e.g. video games).

Student-drawn Library Designs

With the goal to better understanding students' desired uses of library spaces, we invited students to draw the ideal library layout. Each student was paid \$10 for forty-five minutes of their time. The specific task was again similar to the "Rochester" study; students were 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 (i.e., they do

not own a printer or scanner). 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 only walk-in use by students. The current lack of group study space and a dedicated quiet study area were also highlighted.

Online Student Survey

All currently enrolled students were invited via email to take an online survey about the library. A total of 111 responses were ultimately available for analysis, representing approximately 8% of the total student body. Undergraduate students comprised 54% (n=60) of the responders. Graduate students made up the remaining 46% (n = 51). For one of the questions 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. The results were students found the course instructor to be more helpful than others and no differences were seen among the helpfulness of the others. There were no significant differences either between graduate and undergraduate students or among students from various métiers.

Open-ended Comments

The online survey included an optional open-ended question: Is there anything else you would like to say about the Library?

Collections (N=23)

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 our 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).

Services (N=23)

Comments focused mostly on the desire for extended hours of operation. 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.

Facilities (N=17)

Students want a library with more comfortable seating, a quieter atmosphere, and group study space.

Technology (N=16)

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

Students at CalArts expect to create their own information-seeking paradigm, one that will not impose an external artistic perspective and may be nonlinear. Our students are very much social beings and see the research process the same. Personal interaction is an important component of “research” and should inform library planning. 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 learning hub. The clearly revealed starting point for the library to be able to engage with students within this hub is to first build our relationships with the faculty.

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 us with a wealth of information to provide the framework and focus necessary to inform both strategic and long-range planning. Moreover, areas for immediate attention have clearly surfaced.

References

About CalArts. Retrieved August 26, 2009, from <http://calarts.edu/aboutcalarts>

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