ARLIS/NA Poster Session: “The Library as a Site of Artistic/Intellectual Discovery.”
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The Libraries at Vanderbilt University offered a unique program of collaboration between its physical spaces and user services with the studio art curriculum to investigate the ingrained common denominators of purpose between art and libraries. The project was not the typical art-on-the-wall approach, nor an attempt to beautify the library spaces with attractive images. The intent was to recognize the academic missions of the library and of the Art Department and to find original ways to integrate these two missions into an interpretation of their complementary qualities.

An Installation Art Class approached the library with the initial proposal. Planning between library directors, librarians, faculty, and students resulted in a class project that approached the library as a set of locations and services whose qualities could be emphasized and articulated through transformations both physical and conceptual. Projects such as one titled Can You Hear Me Now? addressed the issue of noise and quiet in the library, involving the deployment of ear plugs and amplifying normal ambient noise, asking the question “what makes silence golden?” The concept evolved from a LibQual+Survey concerned with noise in the library. Ventilation ducts were transformed into playful and animated sculptures. Study spaces were reconfigured to invite students to ponder the concepts of studying, the nature of books, and how academic information becomes the catalyst to imaginative thinking on the processes of research and learning. A particularly engaging project was Silver Bells, which featured about 1000 small silver bells hung from trees in the Music library courtyard—it was magical and wonderful!

The student artists had an opportunity to explain their projects at an “Art Opening Reception” to an audience of students, faculty from various academic departments, library staff, and representatives from the local press.

This proposal requests the opportunity to share this unique collaboration between the library and an academic department. With careful planning, and provocative content, the library mission can present itself as a vital force in the life of the campus community, one that proposes a new definition of enlightened learning. A measure of the success of this project is that the current Guide to Libraries brochure features photographs of the student projects, explicitly standing behind the driving idea of the project, that the library is a place and an institution that invites new definitions of learning.