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## Only a Third of Students Enter College with Research Skills

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POSTED BY [TERRI WILLIAMS](#) ON JULY 12, 2017 AT 6:58 AM



Research is an integral part of the college experience. Regardless of major, students are required to discover information and then interpret and synthesize their findings either orally or in writing. However, a recent *Library Journal* survey reveals that only 30% of first-year students enter college prepared with college-level research skills.

The survey of librarians in 543 colleges and universities (399 four-year and 144 two-year schools) reveals the following:

- Only 30% of first-year students at four-year schools are prepared to conduct college-level research.
- Only 23% of first-year students at community colleges are prepared to conduct college-level research.

The surveyed librarians believe these are the top challenges facing freshmen students:

- The inability to evaluate sources for reliability.
- The inability to establish a research topic and design objectives.
- The inability to properly cite sources.
- Overconfidence/apathy/short attention span.
- An overreliance on Google.

## EXAMINING THE RESEARCH SKILLS CHALLENGE

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That last item stands out to Dr. Robert Furey, associate provost of international relations and field studies at Harrisburg University of Science and Technology. “I think that

undisciplined Google searches have destroyed the ability of upcoming students to do proper research, let alone synthesize these findings,” Furey tells *GoodCall*<sup>®</sup>. “Research skills go hand in hand with the ability to evaluate and integrate what information they do manage to find, and these skills also need to be developed.”

The overreliance on internet searches is also problematic to Sebastien Marion, virtual services librarian at New York Institute of Technology. Marion specializes in education technology, contemporary literacies, and libraries, and tells *GoodCall*<sup>®</sup>, “Students are Google-centric, they research using shallow strategies, snacking on search engines.”

In addition, the ready availability of an abundance of information creates a deceptive level of confidence in these students. “They arrive unprepared for the complexities and rigor required when accessing and evaluating scholarly information,” Marion explains. “As a result, their problem-solving skills and ability to develop conceptual knowledge suffer.” He also expects this issue to get worse. “Due to the increasing power of search engines, bots and digital assistants, this skills gap can be expected to grow.”

However, there’s an obvious disconnect between students and faculty. Harmony Faust is vice president of marketing at Gale, a Cengage company that provides libraries with content, research tools and technology. Faust tells *GoodCall*<sup>®</sup>, “Many college students may feel confident in the strength of their research skills, but in a recent survey conducted by Cengage, the results show that despite 77% of college students considering their research skills to be ‘good’ or ‘very good,’ 61% of college instructors say that they are ‘not confident’ in their students’ skills.”

It's a disconnect observed on a regular basis by Julie Todaro, Ph.D., president of the American Library Association. Todaro, also dean of library services at Austin Community College, tells *GoodCall*<sup>®</sup>, "I see this every day – people who are not only coming from high school unprepared, but many adults who are retraining, retooling, or just beginning, are really unprepared in terms of critical thinking skills and the use of technology."

Todaro says that many first-year students haven't grasped the concept of critical thinking, and can't distinguish between fake and real news. "Whether they are born digital or returning to college, many students don't know how to read and interpret information," Todaro explains. "They need to understand how to use sources, and one of the most important things is how to use other people's works without plagiarizing."

## GETTING STUDENTS UP TO SPEED

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According to the survey, 97% of college libraries offer some sort of information literacy instruction, but rarely are the classes or workshops mandatory. And, in the majority of four-year and two-year schools, these sessions amount to one hour (or less) of instruction.

Todaro says there are 47,000 students at her college, and with Early College Start, she estimates that 5,000 of her students are high school kids who take college level courses. "Out of my 36 librarians, two are working in high schools with high school librarians to better prepare students."

Faust believes that it's important to engage students at this level. "To better prepare students for college, it is essential to introduce research projects in high school that allow students to develop lifelong research skills." This type of preparatory work pays big dividends. "As students become more familiar with how databases work and better understand how to access credible, current information, they become more engaged in the content, leading to better learning experiences," Faust says.

Schools such as Todaro's are taking a proactive approach to help both high school and college students. The school offers a variety of library services including live chats and virtual assistance to help students evaluate information and fake news, choose and build research papers, cite sources, and avoid plagiarism. Todaro says the school's library has a three-pronged approach:

- Orientation (higher ed success initiatives including awareness and tutorials).
- Designing large numbers of online sites that provide 24-hour support and vets sources.
- Providing significant destinations and pathways to the internet.

But, not all schools offer these types of services, and even when they do, students must be committed to taking an active role in their own academic success.

Marion offers the following advice to students who are transitioning from high school to college:

- Develop patterns early in your academic career that scaffold and reinforce success.

- Go out of your way to interact with librarians who are both allies and sources of mentorship.
- Learn how to ask questions and explore new modes of research. Being independent in college is a myth.
- Consider words carefully when formulating queries and deciding on keywords.
- Develop an understanding of the landscape of available resources and applications.
- Reframe social media to account for networked learning.
- Curate content that supports your curiosities and passions.



### **TERRI WILLIAMS**

Terri Williams graduated with a B.A. in English from the University of Alabama at Birmingham. Her education, career, and business articles have been featured on Yahoo! Education, U.S. News & World Report, The Houston Chronicle, and in the print edition of USA Today Special Edition. Terri is also a contributing author to "A Practical Guide to Digital Journalism Ethics," a book published by the Center for Digital Ethics and Policy at Loyola University Chicago.



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