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First Impressions: LJ's First Year Experience Survey

by [Jennifer A. Dixon](#)

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First-year college and university students enter with widely varying levels of information literacy, particularly in light of the funding crisis that has left so many K–12 public schools without functioning school libraries and trained school librarians/media specialists. *LJ* recently set out to understand what information literacy instruction entering students need, what they're getting, and what impact it has on their experience as first-year students. In January and February, *LJ* circulated a survey, sponsored by Credo, to 12,000 college and university libraries, both two-year and four-year institutions. Some 543 schools (144 two-year and 399 four-year)

How many first-year students enter your institution prepared for college-level research?

Respondents working in four-year institutions estimate that under a third (**30%**) of their first-year students arrive prepared to do college-level research. The percentage drops to **23%** in community colleges.

	TOTAL	TWO-YEAR/ COMMUNITY COLLEGE	FOUR-YEAR COLLEGE/ UNIVERSITY
TOTAL	453	122	331
Less than 10%	15%	24%	12%
10–19%	23%	27%	22%
20–29%	23%	23%	23%
30–39%	16%	13%	18%
40–49%	8%	4%	9%
50–59%	10%	7%	11%
60–69%	3%	3%	3%
70% or more	1%	0%	3%
AVERAGE % OF FIRST-YEAR STUDENTS PREPARED	28.1%	22.6%	30.2%

SOURCE: *LJ* FIRST-YEAR EXPERIENCE SURVEY 2017

responded. Credo presented a first look at the data at the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) conference in Baltimore, with commentary and takeaways from Ray Pun, first-year student success librarian at California State University, Fresno, and a 2012 *LJ* Mover & Shaker.

WHERE TO FIND, WHICH TO TRUST

Librarians at both community colleges and four-year colleges and universities ranked the ability to evaluate sources for reliability as the top challenge for first-year students. Students at four-year schools also lack awareness of library resources and find it challenging to identify appropriate sources for their assignments. At two-year schools, students lack prior information literacy experience and are not well versed in advanced research skills. For example, many have problems with proper citation formats. Many new students lack experience in using an academic library or completing research projects. According to a librarian at a public university in Puerto Rico, "Most of them did not know how to select and establish a research topic and how to design objectives to do their research. Many of them don't have previous experiences doing research and using peer-reviewed journals and other materials or resources of the library." Librarians noted that some students arrive having attended high schools without a library and lack basic computer skills or experience navigating a library.

THE ILLUSION OF INFORMATION

Potentially trickier, students don't always understand that they need to learn these skills, or how they are helpful. Respondents stated that first-year students sometimes lack an understanding of what they need to learn or how research can benefit them. Overconfidence may make students less willing to attend or absorb new training. Other librarians cited problems such as student apathy and a lack of attention span as additional challenges. Overall, librarians estimated that less than a third of first-year students (28%) are prepared for college-level research. Contrary to what some might expect, a great presence of first-generation college students did not correlate to an additional need for help: 26% of schools with more than one-fifth first-generation enrollments reported that their students come unprepared, vs. 29% of schools with less than one-fifth first-generation students. Breaking through to technology-savvy young students can also present a challenge. According to LaRita Schandorff, reference and instructional services librarian at Northwest Nazarene University, ID, librarians must "convince[e] them that library resources are better than what they can find in a list of Google results.... they don't always appreciate the difference, depth, and reliability of library resources." While many respondents referenced overreliance on Google as a major obstacle for incoming students, a few—7%—offer instruction on using Google effectively, including Google Scholar.

THE CURRENT STATE OF INSTRUCTION

Information literacy instruction for new students is nearly universal: 97% of respondents offer such training. In addition to databases, librarians provide instruction on topics like library resources, search strategies, topic development, avoiding plagiarism, citations, and managing research strategy. In most schools, however, it is optional: only 22% of four-year and just 7% of two-year schools have an information literacy class requirement. Librarians provide embedded support to select classes in 35% of four-year and 23% of two-year schools and offer optional library workshops in 33% of four-year and 40% of two-year schools. Where librarians are embedded, it is usually (70%) in first-year seminar or writing courses. Many also embed librarians in social science or language and literature classes. In addition, 21% of community colleges provide information literacy instruction upon faculty request. Instructors frequently tailor their presentations to specific disciplines, such as language and literature, social science, and communications. A minority offer only a fundamentals course. Where information literacy is handled through freshman orientation, that instruction is typically not tailored to a specific discipline. While some schools employ librarians specifically focused on information literacy education—14%—or first-year experience—9%—most rely on reference or public services librarians. Three-quarters of libraries coordinate with academic departments to facilitate first-year information literacy coursework, in particular orientation services, student affairs, and the learning resource and writing center. According to multiple survey respondents, faculty buy-in to the importance of information literacy instruction is key to ensuring this instruction stays relevant for

students. In particular, survey responses noted the value of faculty setting aside class time dedicated to information literacy into for-credit coursework. *LJ* also inquired about the ACRL information literacy framework. Of the respondents, 67% of those at four-year schools and 62 percent of those at two-year schools have ample familiarity with the framework. The most commonly employed frameworks are "Research as Inquiry" and "Searching as Strategic Exploration," while the least is "Information Creation as a Process."

TIME & RELEVANCE REMAIN CHALLENGES

Most librarians noted that they only have a couple of hours set aside by the institution for a tour of the library and a presentation on resource evaluation and proper citation. Many find this inadequate to correct students' research habits or to tailor instruction to diverse student needs and levels of experience. Limited classroom time can hinder librarians' ability to ensure students receive and retain information. Wrote Theresa Zelasko, outreach and information literacy librarian at

How many scheduled hours of information literacy instruction would you estimate first year students at your institution receive on average?

	TOTAL	TWO-YEAR/ COMMUNITY COLLEGE	FOUR-YEAR COLLEGE/ UNIVERSITY
TOTAL	511	135	376
1 hour or less	34%	41%	31%
2 hours	30%	33%	29%
3 to 5 hours	26%	22%	28%
6 to 10 hours	4%	2%	4%
Over 10 hours	6%	3%	7%
AVERAGE NUMBER OF HOURS	4.3	3.6	4.6
MEDIAN NUMBER OF HOURS	2.0	2.0	2.0

SOURCE: *LJ* FIRST-YEAR EXPERIENCE SURVEY 2017

Southwestern University, Georgetown, TX, "My biggest challenge is inconsistency between faculty's desires for students to learn to research with me, an expert, and the amount of time I truly need to do my job effectively." Librarians also noted that information literacy instruction is just one of many novel educational endeavors that confront new college students. Consequently, it can prove challenging to teach new research skills adequately while students are being bombarded with other first-time experiences. As Andi Sibley, reference and user services librarian at Bryn Athyn College, PA, explained, it can be an issue to "giv[e] them the full scope of library research in a deep and meaningful way in a limited time frame when they are also engaged in orienting themselves to the whole college experience socially, academically, spiritually, and physically." A librarian at a four-year West Virginia college wrote, "The challenges are overloaded curricula, ambivalent (nonlibrary) instructors, unclear/ever-changing expectations, and a lack of time." Some survey respondents noted that information literacy courses may have a better impact when they are customized to a particular assignment or coursework that anchors the lessons. According to the director of an Illinois community college learning commons. "If [the students] are not engaged in a research project, the information is meaningless at the time it is presented." In addition, many librarians emphasized the need to show students that information literacy is a skill that will serve students in the long-term, throughout college-level classes and beyond.

MEASURING IMPACT

The vast majority—90%—of schools measure student success in their first year. Success is measured by student retention in 69% of schools, while 46% work with a student satisfaction survey, and 40% monitor student GPA. Particularly at two-year schools, success may be measured based on graduation rates or reduced remedial classes. In terms of evaluating information literacy, according to Jonas Lamb, public services librarian and assistant professor at Egan Library, University of Alaska Southeast, Juneau, it is important to engage in assessment "to gauge where they are coming from in terms of comfort evaluating and thinking critically about the information ecosystem." The next phase of research should be to correlate assessments of instructional success with the scope and method of library involvement in first-year experience across the field as a whole; the University of South Carolina's National Resource Center for the First-Year Experience and Students in Transition's 2012–13 Survey of First-Year Seminars could serve as a template. In this way, best practices can be identified and incorporated to help drive first-year library instruction. (Complete results of this year's survey can be downloaded here.)

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First-Year Experience Survey   information literacy