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Incoming First-Year Student Information Literacy Assessment

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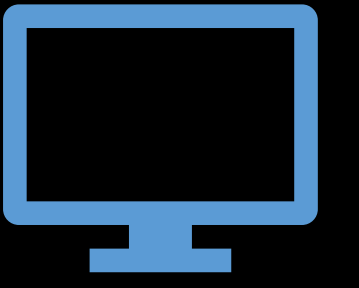
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Incoming First-Year Student Information Literacy Assessment



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Abstract

A survey of incoming FHSU first-year students was distributed in 2020 and 2021 as the beginning of a longitudinal mixed-methods assessment of the information literacy skills students have when they first arrive at FHSU. Survey questions were designed around strengths-based and constructivist pedagogy, assessing students' existing knowledge to reveal appropriate starting points for library instruction in large-enrollment first-year courses. Survey questions were phrased as research scenarios assessing the skills of evaluating information, identifying source type, and conducting research strategies. Not enough data was collected during Fall 2020 to be statistically significant, however, the Fall 2021 survey resulted in 564 responses yielding a statistically significant sample size of the incoming class. Only data from Fall 2021 is reported. The results corroborated several similar studies finding that students self-report high confidence levels in their information literacy skills, yet vary on how accurately they performed those skills. The survey participants were most accurate at performing tasks of evaluating information, moderately accurate when identifying the appropriate information type for a specific research scenario, and somewhat accurate when constructing a research strategy.

Introduction

According to the American Library Association (ALA), information literacy refers to the skills and competencies associated with recognizing when information is required, locating the information, evaluating the information, and using the information ethically and responsibly.

Although students possess many of the skills and competencies associated with information literacy (Pashkova-Balkenhol et al., 2019), they often lack the experience to transfer these skills into an academic context.

Our survey, administered in Fall of 2020 and Fall 2021, was designed to assess skills related to finding information, evaluating information, and identifying the best source for an informational need.

The survey design follows best practices in information literacy assessment: it is conducted at an institutional level; allows for longitudinal data gathering and pre/post-testing; is quick and easy to administer; could be used by any institution; and focuses on national standards of information literacy (O'Conner et al., 2001).

Our study provides targeted information on current FHSU students, which will allow faculty to pinpoint the exact trouble points for incoming first-year students in the research process and teach accordingly.

Methods

The survey was created through Qualtrics and consisted of:

- **2 qualifier questions** to ensure students hadn't yet received library instruction with UNIV101 and were 18+ for IRB purposes
- **9 information literacy questions** using multiple choice about:
 - Evaluating Information
 - Identifying Source Type
 - Conducting Research Strategies
- **4 demographic questions** that gauged research experience, major, and confidence

Year 1 (Fall 2020):

- Data was collected prior to UNIV 101 library instruction which occurred during the second week of the fall semester
- ✉ The survey was emailed directly to first-year students twice: The week before classes began AND the first week of classes
- **66 responses** were received (completed and partially completed)

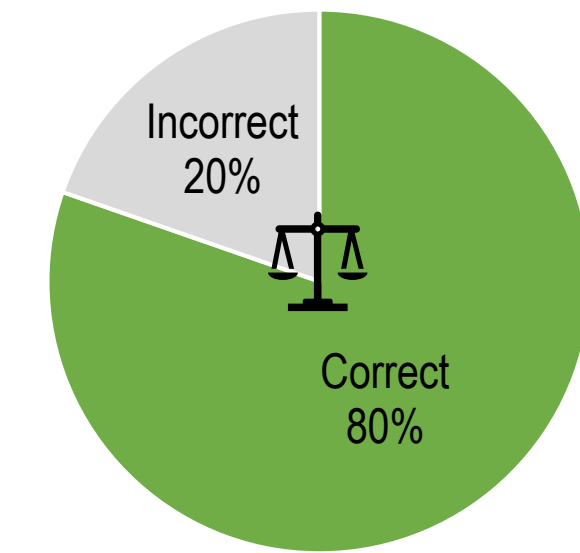
Year 2 (Fall 2021):

- Data was collected in two ways:
 - ✉ Direct email sent from UNIV 101 instructors before library instruction which occurred during the fourth week of the fall semester
 - 📄 A paper survey given at the beginning of library instruction to catch anyone who had not taken the survey
- **564 responses** were received (completed and partially completed)

Results

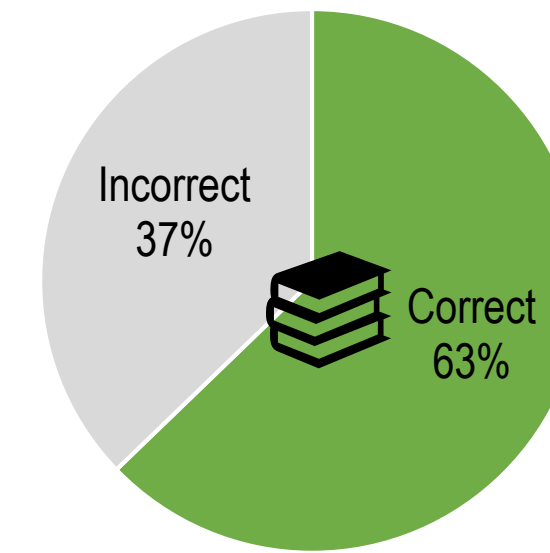
From Fall 2021 Survey:

Evaluating Information



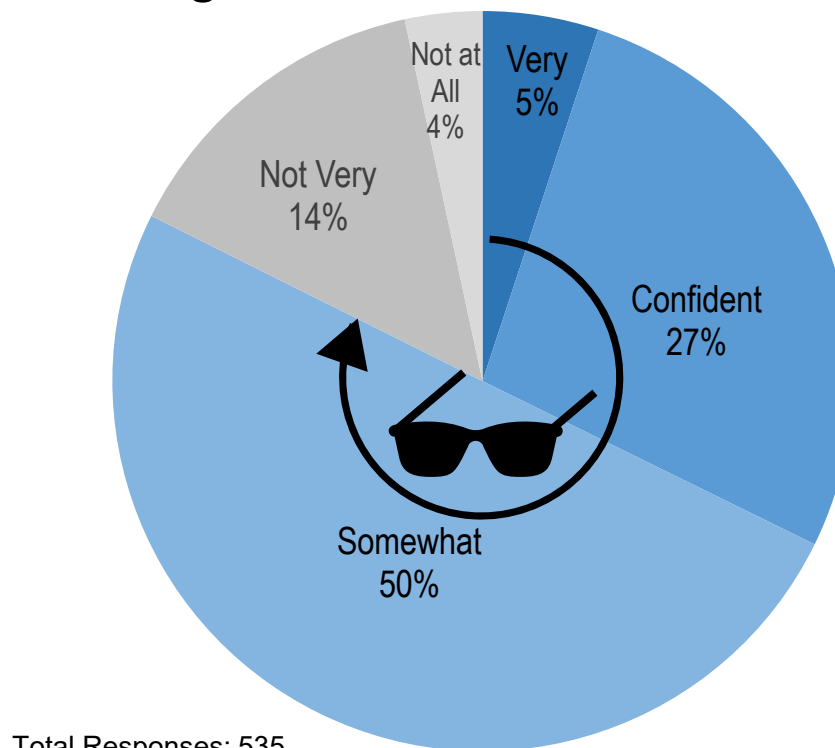
Based on three questions about evaluating information with average response rate of 535 responses

Identifying Needed Information Types



Based on three questions about identifying needed information types with average response rate of 538 responses

Confidence in Ability to Conduct College-Level Academic Research



Total Responses: 535

Information Literacy Skills of First-Year Students

Discussion

80% of the first-year students surveyed successfully evaluated information resources for credibility, accuracy, and relevancy. They could gauge a resource's reliability and authority by evaluating its creators' subject expertise, societal position, lived experiences, tone, and language. First-year students' proficiency in this means that Forsyth Library instruction can spend less time on how to evaluate the quality of resources and focus instead on other areas that students struggle with mastering.

63% percent of the first-year students correctly identified the best information resource for a specific information need. Those who answered these questions incorrectly did not recognize the impact of an information resource's creation process on its suitability to meet an information need. However, most students rightly determined that an information resource can be presented formally (such as scholarly papers) or informally (such as social media) and still be a relevant and authoritative resource. Forsyth Library can fill this gap in understanding by highlighting the varied creation, publication, and dissemination processes that diverse information resources go through and how those processes affect which authorities are heard, what content is created, and which audiences are reached.

41% of the first-year students accurately constructed a research strategy. While more students could match the information needed to appropriate search tools (such as library catalogs, scholarly databases, and web resources), the majority could not efficiently design or refine a search strategy or use different types of searching language appropriately. To increase first-year students' proficiency in constructing search strategies, Forsyth Library can emphasize the iterative nature of the research process and the benefits of creating a research plan before starting the search process. Research plans can guide students in identifying criteria for inclusion, such as information types (e.g., primary sources, qualitative information, and data set), resource types (e.g., books, peer-reviewed journals, and oral histories), and the use of natural language or keyword language searching, appropriate to the search tool and the information need.

Conclusion

Although **82% of students said they felt at least somewhat confident** about conducting library research, slightly more than half of the students correctly answered questions related to identifying needed information types and less than half correctly answered questions related to research strategy. Overall, the percentage of correct responses in 2021 was lower than in 2020. This may be because of the larger sample size, since less confident students may have been less likely to fill out the survey in 2020 when they received it via email and not through their UNIV 101 course. It may also be a result of pandemic-related impact of the first-year students' previous education, as they had less in-person instructional time during their senior year of high school.

The library will continue to coordinate the longitudinal study with UNIV 101 in order to maintain a large sample size, although minor methodological changes may be made to facilitate data analysis. The library would like to supplement the 2022 survey with an observational study in which students are asked to narrate their thought process while searching for library resources to complete a sample assignment. In the meantime, focused instruction on information types and especially research strategy may help to address gaps in information literacy.

References

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