



PROJECT

Information Literacy

Visiting Research Scholar Program at Purdue University Libraries

Keynote: “How Today’s Students Conduct Research” (May 15, 2018)

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Today, more students in the U.S. are attending college than ever before. An unprecedented number of these students were *born digital*—meaning digital technologies have been a constant feature in their lives. Finding, evaluating, and using information is exponentially more complex than it was a generation ago, especially since the information landscape has shifted from one of scarcity of resources to abundance and overload. For most students, information literacy competencies are always being formed, practiced, and learned. This combination of factors make today’s students an important and unique cohort to study, given their unprecedented abundance in enrollment numbers, their learning styles, their needs as information seekers, users, and creators, and their professional destinies.

Project Information Literacy (PIL) is a national research institute that has surveyed and interviewed more than 16,000 university students at 88 U.S. higher education institutions since 2008, making PIL the largest study of information literacy ever conducted. PIL seeks to understand how students find information and conduct research—in their words and through their experiences—for coursework and use in their everyday lives. Few studies have explored what finding, using, and creating information means to students today, while giving insights into how high school skills may transfer to college and how higher education information practices may subsequently transfer to the workplace. Even fewer studies by library and information scientists have systematically investigated how students who were born digital conceptualize and operationalize research practices for learning in school, at work, in their everyday lives, and as lifelong learners.

PIL’s ongoing research has found students’ information competencies are put to the test in the vast information landscape they inhabit during their college years. PIL’s findings indicate a large majority of students still want to learn, but many are lost in a thicket of information overload. Nearly all students use strategies driven by efficiency and predictability in order to manage and control a staggering amount of information available to them in college settings. They struggle with managing the IT devices that permeate their lives and endlessly distract them. Most students turn to professors, friends, family members—or no one at all—for help with research, rather than asking librarians. Once they enter the workplace, graduates leverage competencies from college for evaluating and managing published content, but the skills only get them so far.

In this keynote, research takeaways are presented from PIL’s nine research studies. An information-seeking typology for understanding students’ strategies and difficulties with research tasks is introduced. Highlights are presented from PIL’s latest undertaking—a study on how college and high school students interact with news and gather information in the so-called “post-truth” era. A discussion is included about the implications of PIL’s research on teaching, learning, work, and librarianship in the 21st century.

Alison J. Head, Ph.D. is an information scientist and social science researcher. She is the founder and director of Project Information Literacy (PIL), a national research institute that asks: What it is like to be a student in the digital age? In a 2016 *Inside Higher Education* column, Barbara Fister called PIL “hands-down the most important long-term, multi-institutional research project ever launched on how students

use information for school and beyond." Alison has a Ph.D. in library and information science from the University of California at Berkeley where she also received her BA. Currently, she is a Senior Researcher at the metaLAB at Harvard University and a Visiting Research Scholar at Purdue University Libraries. In 2017, she was awarded the inaugural S. T. Lecturership in Library Leadership and Innovation from Harvard Library. From 2011 through 2015, Alison was a Fellow and Faculty Associate at the Berkman Klein Center for Internet & Society at Harvard University.

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